

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION:

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By Any Other Name

By William T. Powers, 1989.

My friends and others have been trying to convince me that I should stop using the word "control" and substitute something else like "regulate" or, more lately, "conserve." I dutifully try on such terms, but they seem to lead to the same sorts of problems that the term "control" creates: unwanted associations. While I am not going to fight any last-ditch salt-the-fields battles over a word, I would like at least to explain why I want to continue using the same term. If my reasons are totally unimpressive, then I suppose I shall have to give in as gracefully as I can. I can always write about "control" under an assumed name, which you can take any way you like.

Here is what the word "control" means to me acting on one's own world of experience to make it become and be what one wants to experience. That is what is left when the idea of control is stripped of its mathematical trappings and engineering terminology without being untrue to the underlying meanings.

Through studying the process of control, I concluded long ago that controlling is the essence of what we call "doing." To do is to control without consciousness of effort. When we fail to control we call it "trying." When the process is working but we are having some sort of difficulty, we say we are "seeking a goal." When we know how we would like things to be but have no idea what to do to make them be like that, we say we are "wishing" or "desiring." When we try to control more than one experience at a time and find that the aims are mutually exclusive, we say we are "in conflict." And when someone else tries to act on us so as to violate our own autonomous organization as control systems, we fight back and say we are "being coerced." We do not give in easily to coercion.

That last is the reason I am being asked to use some word that seems nicer than "control." Nearly every objection I have heard comes down to an objection to people controlling other people. For example, Ranulph Glanville (1987) claims that the idea of control is the same as the idea of command, and that control is a fascistic notion. And Heinz von Foerster maintains that the idea of a hierarchy of control means only a social system with a dictator at the top level. To many others, controlling is the same as forcing oneself or others to do things they don't want to do, by overcoming one's own lesser desires or by applying or threatening to apply overwhelming physical force to others.

It doesn't take a genius to realize that the nice people in this world have had some very bad experiences with control, as victims, as spectators, and even occasionally as perpetrators. My own reasons for wanting to understand this phenomenon go back to my personal experiences with others who wished to control me, to instances when I tried to control others, and to my horror at seeing what happened in my lifetime as a result of one person trying to control millions of others. But I also think it doesn't take a genius to realize that this is a real phenomenon; people do these things to each other, and changing a word is not going to alter that fact in the slightest.

The irony of it all is that people object to my use of the word "control" precisely because they recognize that the phenomenon of control is all too real. They experience it every day; they see it happening on television every day; they do it themselves every day, to friend and enemy alike, despite their best intentions. What they--what you, my readers on both sides of the issue--must realize is that renaming this phenomenon is not the answer to the problem. The answer can only be to understand what is going on.

The answer is not to stop controlling. Control theory tells us that if we did that, we would all collapse in a boneless heap and die immediately. To live is to control--that is the understanding I have reached in 35 years of studying this phenomenon. The problems among people do not arise from the fact that they act, every moment whether awake or asleep, as hierarchies of control systems, but from the fact that they do not know this is true of all living systems and do not understand what this implies.

If we are patient enough to learn the lesson, control theory can teach us why the persistent attempt to control another person always leads in the end to the pitting of violence against violence. There is simply no other way that one person can control another person against that other person's will. We can disguise this fact by a system of laws that partially conceals the threat of violence, but the threat and the actuality are there. We can pretend that our own violence is drawn out of us through provocations by others or by some kind of imperative or necessity, but whatever we pretend, we cannot cease to be in control of our own lives, and we cannot gain real and reliable control over another without the use of overwhelming physical force.

You mustn't think that I am merely moralizing here I think that history shows how ineffective moralizing is. I'm not saying that controlling other people is a bad thing and we ought to stop doing it in order to be nice. I'm after something much more significant: I'm trying to convey an understanding of how controlling works, so we can see when controlling is a natural and necessary part of living, and when it is simply a mistake--when it defeats the very purposes it is supposed to achieve.

When we begin to understand what controlling is, how it works at every level of organization in a living system, we can begin to see how a person can have what seem only the highest motives, yet in carrying them out end up murdering millions of people. Such results are never intended in the be ginning. Adolph Hitler didn't start by saying, "I am going to kill all the Jews" (although he evidently concluded that this was what was required). He said, "I am going to restore self-respect to the German people and myself." Nobody with a scrap of remaining sanity sets out to act against his or her own sense of what is good. But acting in ignorance of human nature has exactly that effect. Pursuing a goal without understanding that others do precisely the same leads in the end to taking whatever action is required and available to reach the goal, including the use of repressive laws, stormtroopers, or bombs, Whatever it takes.

I believe that as we come to understand how living systems act as control systems, we will begin to make sense of what would seem otherwise a growing insanity that afflicts the human race We will come to understand how a disparity of goals, coupled with ignorance of human nature, can lead to conflicts that begin small--that seem to grow out of nothing--and escalate in a drearily predictable way to the usual outcome. We will see that "offense" and "defense" are words for the same thing.

And I believe that out of this understanding we will be able to build another way to manage our relationships with each other.

I see the choice this way we could change the word, or the world. Do you still want to change the word?

Reference

R Glanville, 1987, "The Question of Cybernetics," Cybernetics and Systems 18, 99-112