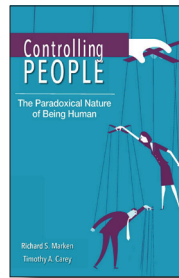


Controlling PEOPLE

The Paradoxical Nature of Being Human

Review by Bruce Nevin
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This compact book introduces Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) to non-technical readers. The title tackles head-on the objections that many of us have to the word *control*. The phrase *controlling people* might suggest that this is a manual of techniques for making others do your bidding; or it could be a how-to book for dealing with power-seeking people who want to make us do their bidding. The ambiguity points to a paradox of human experience which the book develops as a central theme. The resolution is presented as the key to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. You feel better when you're in control of things that matter to you, and the same goes for everyone else.

The first two chapters show that we are all controlling people (in both senses), how ubiquitous and pervasive controlling is, and the nature of controlling. Controlling is essential to life. To live is to have purposes and to act so as to realize those purposes. Anything that is alive is a controlling creature. Non-living things may be controlled, or not, but so far as we can tell they cannot control anything. The purposes that they have are due to being controlled for one purpose or another.

The next three chapters introduce Perceptual Control Theory (PCT), the science that accounts for controlling. Chapter three describes the elegant mechanism of circular causation by which we act so as to realize our purposes. In Chapter 4, we learn how the “multitudes” of purposes within us are hierarchically arranged. Higher-level perceptions are controlled by prescribing purposes at the next-lower level of the perceptual hierarchy. Obviously, control is not always successful. Chapter 5 describes the remarkably simple innate process of trial-and-error reorganization, the imperceptible inward process from which emerge learnings of all sorts, including acquired skills, ‘aha’ solutions, and basic cognitive development.

Given this basic understanding of the nuts and bolts of how control works, the paradox of “controlling people” makes more sense. So long as we are alive, we cannot help controlling, that is, having purposes and acting to realize them. And as social beings, our purposes necessarily involve one another. We have norms or standards for how people should act, and we apply these to ourselves as well as to others (even if the application is in the form of rebellion).

Chapter 6 describes three ways in which people control others. One, “do what I want in order to get what you want”, was elaborated by the behaviorist psychologists and other animal trainers. A second, control by deception, is familiar from advertising, public relations, and propaganda. The third is control by brute force, overwhelming the victim's capacity to control. (Other options are touched on in later chapters.) Controlling another person (or animal) requires you to be on the watch to make sure they comply, and it opens you to counter-control, as in *The Good Soldier Švejk*¹ or *Catch-22*.

The chapter closes with a valuable discussion of ‘self control’, where one purpose is controlled by means of another. The analysis of the dieter's problem of so-called ‘willpower’ as a conflict between two purposes within the same person is by itself worth the price of admission for a lay audience, though more deeply significant payoffs are yet to come in the more general treatment of conflict.

Chapter 7 begins with the most obvious cases of conflict, when people's purposes cross, with a very useful distinction (or gradation, rather) between arbitrary control and respectful control. Respectful control recognizes that other people have their own goals, and at least tries to accommodate their need to be in control of their lives. This makes possible

1 See Wikipedia

various cooperative arrangements in which each participant is in some respects controlled by others and in some respects controls others. In these arrangements, the relinquishment of control is voluntary, that is, it is done in a controlled way (as shown by the fact that it can be rescinded). Each participant uses their accommodation to others as means to better control other important purposes. There is a gradation between fully cooperative arrangements and those in which participation is enforced, if only because the arrangement is the only available means of controlling important variables, as in behaviorist conditioning. Only hinted here are the very exciting developments in PCT sociology and anthropology investigating the collective control of the ‘furniture’ of civic life, including social norms.

The concept of loop gain, introduced with the example of the dieter in Chapter 6, is brought out here as a way to keep social interactions from escalating into conflict. The effect of higher gain in controlling a given variable is that you are more attentive to that variable and more quickly and vigorously resist any disturbances that would shift it from the state that you want it to be in. It’s how important it is to you. Most social interactions involve control at fairly low gain. If someone fails to return a smile or a wave, you don’t ordinarily turn back and demand that they do. The example given is asking someone to pass the salt, but they’re engrossed in conversation, so you employ other means to get the salt—you might ask someone else, or go get it yourself. Here, the gain on controlling use of the salt remains relatively high, but the gain on controlling particular means of getting the salt is low, and that is what frees you to look for alternative means. There is a lost opportunity here to bring out the relationship of this to the Method of Levels in the next chapter, but the connection is brought out at the end of the book.

Chapter 7 closes with an entertaining survey of the field of self-improvement. What needs ‘improving’—the source of that dissatisfaction that leads us to buy self-help books, videos, and courses—is internal conflict. The ‘improver’ is the Reorganization system.

The good part about our reorganization capacity is that even the most distressing turmoil can be resolved given the right conditions and sufficient time. It may be something of a drawback to this ability, however, that, because it works so well,

almost any technique will seem successful if it’s applied to enough people.

The secret sauce behind every success for a given therapeutic technique or therapist is the Method of Levels (MoL). Chapter 8 begins with the striking proposal that every time we make a choice, we experience a conflict and then resolve it. We routinely resolve mundane conflicts all the time, with others as well as within ourselves, without ever becoming particularly aware of them as conflicts. The means that I use to control a given purpose could be either A or B. But there are reasons for using A, and different reasons for using B—that is, A and B also serve other, additional purposes, and as long as those motivations are out of awareness the choice is difficult to make. Choosing one, the motivation for the other choice is dissatisfied. The higher the gain at the level of A and B, the greater the distress. By bringing awareness above that level to the motivation for A and to the motivation for B until both are held in view, the problem resolves itself. Just as, at the dinner table, it’s really not so important to make Alice listen to me, there are other ways to get the salt, in the same way lowering the gain at the level of an internal conflict and turning attention to the motives that are driving each side of the conflict opens the way to a spontaneous resolution.

Consciousness, or awareness, is the Mysterious Moe of PCT. No one knows quite what it is, only that with it ‘we’ seem to move around from one perception to another. Chapter 7 closes with a brief discussion of the role of awareness in MoL, and some cogent suggestions for applying MoL to ourselves. It turns out that talking to yourself might not be so crazy after all. Rightly understood, it might be just the thing for sanity, peace of mind, and—dare we say it?—self-improvement.

Chapter 10 starts off with a definition of freedom as being in control, and then surveys the three enemies of freedom: overwhelming disturbance, ignorance, and conflict. Control by definition acts to maintain a perceptual variable in a preferred state in spite of unpredictable disturbances in the environment that affect that variable. As we drive we keep the car more or less centered in our lane of the road, despite curves, bumps, and wind. Some disturbances are just too strong for our means of control. During a hurricane, we should park the car and seek shelter.

Ignorance is remedied by education and practice. Knowing how to play baseball won't help you understand a cricket match, and vice versa. There's a deft political touch here, affirming that investment in education is investment in freedom, and identifying poverty as overwhelming disturbance.

Conflict, also, is re-examined in terms of politics.

So once again we confront a paradox of controlling people—in order to be in control (free) people have to allow themselves to be controlled (to play by the rules of society). This is actually the paradox that all societies have to confront. How to organize themselves so that each individual is best able to control their own life without giving up too much control to the powers that be. . . . [those] who enforce the rules that are implemented to reduce interpersonal conflict.

Although we don't generally think of it that way, control actually restricts one's freedom. We don't think of it that way because, when we're controlling successfully, our experience is just as we wish it to be. If you did want a different experience at the same time, you could not control either experience with complete satisfaction, due to conflict. The bumper sticker might say "I'd rather be sailing", but when you're driving the car you can't be sailing a boat. You have to restrict yourself to being a part of the machinery of the car, its control system. As my grandfather used to say, the part of a car that causes the most accidents is the nut behind the wheel. If you were to daydream too much about sailing, it might reduce your competence as a driver. But why drive? Why sail? Those questions lift you above the conflict, and in general

. . . having the flexibility to shift our consciousness to the higher, more valued, and perhaps more abstract goals will help to expand our freedom in any given situation. The more specific and particular your goals are in any given situation the greater the likelihood that your freedom will be restricted.

By applying the MoL process, we can identify what matters most to us, and then

we will have a much better sense of the battles that are worth fighting for. We will know with clarity and determination what is important to us, and we will also be more certain of the things that can fall by the wayside.

The final chapter suggests how an understanding of ourselves as controlling people can help us "understand that *altruism* is, ultimately, a selfish act. . . . Paradoxically by giving others the freedom to have the control they want, we will actually be giving ourselves more freedom as well." The suggestion is that this is how to establish more humane social and economic arrangements.

Control is the way it is. Life is control. We need to understand it, and we need to learn to live with it. We need to strive for a world where people prioritize finding ways to control what is important to themselves in a way that minimizes the extent to which they interfere with the controlling of others.

That, and all that it implies, would really be a world worth the trouble.

Why would anyone wish it otherwise? Why indeed. But the book may well be forgiven for not concerning itself with the pathologies which make such a ruckus in the world. It is engaging, accessible, and serves its purposes well.