

People as Living Things: The Psychology of Perceptual Control

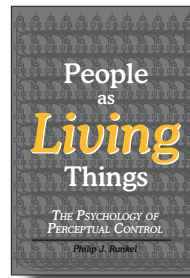
Reviews from
the web

This book is inspirational to read. Runkel writes with meticulous attention to detail, accuracy and precision yet his writing is almost poetic such is his mastery of prose. As if the writing style wasn't enough, the subject matter is revolutionary in the paradigmatic sense of the word. Runkel essentially has written a psychology text for a first year university course. The difference is that Runkel has approached the subject matter of psychology from the perspective of perceptual control. Runkel is quite literally coming at the material from the other end. Whereas modern (and historical) psychology has attempted to explain behaviour as controlled output, Runkel explores behaviour from the perspective of controlled perceptual input. The results are surprising and refreshing though not always comfortable. Do not read this book expecting to find your ideas of behaviour to be endorsed and reinforced. The perspective of perceptual control affords new opportunities for considering behaviour. These opportunities suggest new questions to ask and new answers to seek. The promise of a better world seems much more attainable after reading this book.

Timothy A. Carey 2008

Our ability to make sense of the physical world would be greatly diminished without the ability to formulate mathematical models that make prediction possible. The social sciences have long been hampered by the absence of such models. As Phil Runkel lucidly demonstrates, we are on the threshold of a new era in psychology and sociology. In the absence of quantitative models, psychological theories are little more than just-so stories. On the other hand, closed-loop negative-feedback models for the first time provide a firm basis for building a quantitative science of human behavior. Runkel demonstrates how such models are constructed and reviews what has been learned by applying them to understanding human beings and their interactions. For anyone who wants to understand and to benefit from the emerging quantitative science of behavior, Phil Runkel's *People as Living Things* is a superb place to start.

Bruce Gregory



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By Philip J. Runkel

Comprehensive, accessible and insightful introduction to Perceptual Control Theory, the science of control in living systems

This book is a tour de force on psychology as a discipline. Well done to Dag Forssell for making this book more widely available! Philip Runkel was Professor of Psychology and Education at the University of Oregon. When he came across William T. Powers (1973) book "Behavior: The Control of Perception", his view of psychology and how it should be studied, researched and practiced experienced a quantum shift. In this book, Powers describes a theory (Perceptual Control Theory; PCT), which was developed from earlier work on control engineering and considers human behaviour as the control of perception. The mechanism is specified in great detail but it basically relies on organised (and reorganising) hierarchies of negative feedback loops. It forms the heritage of several contemporary self-regulation approaches within psychology, but arguably, the original theory is unparalleled in its explanatory power.

There are quite a few books on Power's PCT, but this one I think is unique. It takes the reader very steadily through the principles of PCT using diagrams and everyday examples. The size of the book (500+ B4 pages) is also a strength because PCT can be hard to assimilate and understand within the context of mainstream psychology—Phil Runkel considers and critiques psychological concepts in a measured, perceptive and constructive manner. The book also incorporates some of the most up-to-date implications and applications of PCT in enormous breadth—covering research methodology, social psychology, neuroscience, memory and imagination, personality, language and communication, psychotherapy

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(Method of Levels) and education. It provides a great reference to many other sources—papers, books and some of the most recent online discussions and contributions—that help to illustrate the capacity of PCT to be applied to an enormous range of areas of human behaviour. The language of the book is clear, accessible and welcoming. I would recommend it for anyone starting out with an interest in PCT, or control or self-regulation theories more generally, from the more inquisitive and probing final year undergraduate students through to senior academics and professionals with an applied interest in this field. It may change your take on human behaviour forever!

Warren 2008