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**Self-Actualization**

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Definition

There are various psychological definitions of self-actualization, but these converge on the idea of an organism reaching its full existential capacity. Abraham Maslow popularized the term in the context of his theory of human personality and motivation, though a number of psychologists have employed the term with slightly different theoretical emphases, including one of Maslow’s mentors, Kurt Goldstein (e.g., Goldstein [*1940*](#CR5)). Maslow’s particular sense of self-actualization describes the highest potential of human flourishing, a state of being in which motivation itself largely falls away:

Self-actualization, the coming to full development and actuality of the potentialities of the organism, is more akin to growth and maturation than it is to habit formation or association via reward, that is, it is not acquired from without but is rather an unfolding from within of what is, in a subtle sense, already there. Spontaneity at the self-actualizing level – being healthy, natural – is unmotivated; indeed it is the contradiction of motivation. (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 33)

Key Information

Maslow anticipated, and attempted to corroborate in a seminal though nonsystematic empirical study, that self-actualized individuals would exhibit a number of characteristics as part of their spontaneous self-expression. These included “more efficient perceptions of reality and more comfortable relations with it” (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, p. 153); acceptance of self, others and nature (p. 155); “spontaneity; simplicity, naturalness” (p. 157); “problem centering” (p. 159); detachment and “need for privacy” (p. 160); autonomy, “independence of culture and environment,” and ability to be active, willing agents (p. 162); “continued freshness of appreciation” (p. 163), inclinations to “mystic” and “peak” experiences (p. 164); a “genuine desire to help the human race” (p. 165); “deeper and more profound interpersonal relations than any other adults” (p. 166); a “democratic character structure” (p. 167); a “discrimination between means and ends, between good and evil” (p. 168); a “philosophical, unhostile sense of humor” (p. 169); a kind of “creativeness” distinct from a professional artist’s “creativity” in that is “kin to the naïve and universal creativeness of unspoiled children” (p. 170); “resistance to enculturation”, “the transcendence of any particular culture” (p. 171); and values derived from a “source trait of acceptance” (p. 177). Maslow, resisting the presentation of self-actualization as a pure state of human perfection, noted distinctive flaws in self-actualizers, like being “occasionally capable of an extraordinary and unexpected ruthlessness” and “surgical coldness” (p. 175).

Maslow was particularly fascinated by the ability of self-actualized individuals to resolve apparent dichotomies, like those between selfishness and unselfishness and sexuality and spirituality. Maslow also noted, “in these people, the id, the ego and the superego are collaborative and synergic; they do not war with each other nor are their interests in basic disagreement as they are in neurotic people” (p. 179).

This ability to reconcile or transcend apparent opposites is also often associated with Daoism, a worldview that Maslow frequently references. The Daoist concept of *wu-wei*, or nonstriving (with the implication of achieving virtuosity at something without striving), had a notable influence on Maslow’s understanding of self-actualization. Referencing Daoist philosopher Laozi, Maslow uses learning to dance to illustrate movement toward, and ultimate experience of, the self-actualized state:

One must “learn” for such purpose to be able to drop inhibitions, self-consciousness, will, control, acculturation, and dignity. (“When once you are free from all seeming, from all craving and lusting, then you will move of your own impulse, without so much as knowing that you move” – Lao Tse [Laozi])…. [D]evelopment then proceeds from within rather than from without, and paradoxically the highest motive is to be unmotivated and non-striving, i.e., to behave purely expressively.” (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, pp. 134–135)

Maslow thus anticipated that reaching the expressive state of self-actualization might require some initial striving, but that upon reaching it all striving would fall away. Maslow also expected that individuals would not even begin to strive for self-actualization until other, more basic needs – those described in his “hierarchy of needs” – had all been fully or partially met.

Broader Context of the Human Potential Movement and Humanistic Psychology

Maslow took an interest in this spontaneously expressive, opposite-reconciling state of being in the context of the Human Potential Movement and the humanistic psychology tradition. He was a central figure in both. The Human Potential Movement belongs to a broad class of “true self”-cultivating therapeutic social movements. Historian of psychotherapy Philip Cushman has argued that these “true self” movements were popular in the United States at least since the nineteenth century and took the form of scientifically-framed reworkings of Protestant individualism (Cushman [*1995*](#CR2)).

The Human Potential Movement, though influenced by this relatively unique American tradition, was also responsive to and generally continuous with the psychoanalytic or psychodynamic movement. Humanistic psychologists, while accepting Freud’s notion of a dynamic unconscious whose contents were of therapeutic interest, did not accept Freud’s pessimistic view that the best outcome any human being could expect was “common unhappiness” (Freud and Breuer [*1895*](#CR4)/2004, p. 305). Freud imagined peak psychological health as being freed from neurosis and psychosis by psychoanalysis, but still being necessarily unsatisfied. Freud ([*1930*](#CR3)/2010) argued that dissatisfaction was inescapable because the ever-pressing drives rooted in our evolutionary past (the instinctive drives of “the id”) are incompatible both with our early childhood moral training (consciously and unconsciously embedded in our “superego”) and with maintaining a civilized social order (one of the many practical aspirations of “the ego”).

“True self” movements, including the Human Potential Movement, imagined a best outcome much closer to an individualized heaven state, a pinnacle of near perfection, or at least coherent wholeness and integration (Cushman [*1995*](#CR2)). The findings of Gestalt psychologists that various organisms, including humans, tend to spontaneously perceive whole and relation-sensitive forms from a complex and potentially fragmented sensory input had a strong theoretical influence on both the Human Potential Movement and humanistic psychology (Maslow [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, pp. 305–307). To the extent, the story of our perception is a striving for wholeness, humanistic psychology conceived the story of our general existence in similar terms.

Key figures of the Human Potential Movement sometimes acknowledged the tension that Freud identified between unconscious drives and the aspiration to a civilized social order. However, these figures often treated the latter as a dispensable obstacle to full individual flourishing. Filmmaker Adam Curtis, in his BBC documentary about the Human Potential Movement (appropriately named, *There Is a Policeman Inside All Our Heads He Must Be Destroyed*), summarized the movement’s view as follows: “the unconscious forces inside the human mind… were good. It was their repression by society that distorted them. That is what made people dangerous” (Curtis [*2002*](#CR1)).

Maslow cautiously echoed this perspective:

Many people still think of “the unconscious,” of regression, and of primary process cognition as necessarily unhealthy, or dangerous or bad. Psychotherapeutic experience is slowly teaching us otherwise. Our depths can also be good, or beautiful or desirable. (Toward a Psychology of Being, p. 184)

The tradition of humanistic psychology, as a particular theoretical and therapeutic tradition, was largely continuous with the Human Potential Movement that Malsow was central to. Humanistic psychology brought a more optimistic yet countercultural liberal perspective into the mainstream of American psychology, paralleling the way that the Human Potential Movement brought this perspective closer to the broader American mainstream. Humanistic psychologists aspired to be a “third force” in psychology, rejecting the stark limitations on humanity articulated both by the Freudians and by the behaviorists. Humanistic therapies, like Carl Rogers’ client-centered therapy and Fritz Perls’ Gestalt Therapy, were designed in part to break down the socialized barriers to individual self-expression.

Self-Actualization in Tension with Social Control

Though Freudian practice also sought to transcend self-censorship with free association and dream analysis (as Maslow himself noted appreciatively, [*1954*](#CR6)/1970, pp. 146–148), Freud’s interest was in exposing the contents of the unconscious to gain more effective conscious control over them, so that the dangerous unconscious would wreak less havoc in individual lives and on civilization generally (Cushman [*1995*](#CR2)). For many humanistic therapists in contrast, the purpose of unrestricted self-expression was not to expose something potentially dangerous in need of better-informed control, but to free something essential to individual flourishing from social control altogether (Curtis [*2002*](#CR1)). The humanistic psychological expectation was that this unrestricted self-expression of unconscious impulses would help individuals not only perceive and articulate their own path toward psychological health, but in the process overcome the artificial limits that society conditioned them to impose on themselves.

Maslow himself, in fact, cautiously resisted denigrating all forms of conscious self-control and distinguished between fear-based control (which he considered more neurotic) and other, healthier forms:

There are … controls upon the psyche which do not come out of fear, but out of the necessities for keeping it integrated, organized and unified … And there are also “controls” … which are necessary as capacities are actualized, and as higher forms of expression are sought for, e.g., acquisition of skills through hard work by the artist… But these controls are eventually transcended and become aspects of spontaneity, as they become self. (Maslow [*1962*](#CR8), p. 184)

In Maslow’s framing, self-actualization may be considered a teleological end state, an ideal that some handful of individuals achieve under ordinary circumstances, but that humanistic therapy could potentially help a much larger number of individuals more closely approach. In his time, Maslow perceived that very few people manifested this expressive state of self-actualization as a reliable marker of personality. He wrote, “Though, in principle, self-actualization is easy, in practice it rarely happens (by my criteria, certainly in less than 1% of the adult population)” (Maslow [*1962*](#CR8), p. 190). He explained this small proportion of self-actualizers by the various factors contributing to general society-wide psychopathology, as well as factors like “the conviction that man's intrinsic nature is evil or dangerous” and the fact that “humans no longer have strong instincts which tell them unequivocally what to do, when, where and how” (p. 190).

Criticism

The self-actualization concept has received diverse criticism, and Maslow himself was unsatisfied with how it was often interpreted (Maslow [*1966*](#CR7), p. 109). A common theme in these critiques is the potential selfishness and asocial impulsivity that striving for self-actualization might arouse, especially to the extent self-actualization is perceived as an ego ideal, or an elite psychological status to obtain that might bring other material benefits, like wealth, professional advancement, or attractive romantic partners. For instance, Curtis’s ([*2002*](#CR1)) examination of the Human Potential Movement implies that Maslow’s conception of society-transcending liberal self-actualizers was very easy to depoliticize in an atomistic individualistic direction or even politicize in a rightward direction. The Human Potential Movement generally has sometimes been critiqued as a part of a broader trend of individual self-expressive indulgence undermining the political force of more radical collective action-based movements from the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Civil Rights and anti-war movements (see, e.g., Cushman [*1995*](#CR2)).

Conclusion

Self-actualization is a concept that might be considered analogous to Protestant predestination in its likely effect on aspirational behavior. Ideally, being “heaven-bound” is something that should be independent of one’s efforts, a pure product of being one of the “elect.” In practice, however, being perceived as heaven-bound–by oneself or others–is something that people could strive for, as Max Weber famously noted.

Self-actualization appears to function as a kind of secularized existential anointment, a kind of “cool” for adults. It is theoretically available only to a small select elite, and yet, like predestined heaven-attainment status, it can inspire masses of people to strive to look like they have it even if they do not.

According to Maslow, self-actualization is a state in which motivated striving falls away and authentic integrated free expression flows naturally from every pore of one’s being. And to the extent others appear to achieve this state and reap the benefits of that appearance, it is a state that can be made the object of some very motivated striving indeed, often with ironic results.

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