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ABRAHAM MASLOW ON EXPERIENTIAL AND CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

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*If you want to see the world. . . .
Make yourself into a good instrument of knowledge.*
-- A. H. Maslow (1966, p. 48)

It is apparent from Abraham Maslow's biography (Hoffman, 1988) and from his published journals (Maslow, 1979) that he felt strongly about the importance of maximizing intellectual growth and maturation, and that he derived deep satisfaction from his own intellectual activities. Indeed, Maslow's intellectual activities, in the form of theoretical and empirical contributions, helped to legitimize, develop, and sustain the humanistic and transpersonal psychology movements.

An emphasis on inner experiences and experiential understanding distinguished both the humanistic and the transpersonal psychology movements from the prevailing psychologies of the day. Maslow had a longstanding interest in the study of inner experience and its relationship to experiential and conceptual understanding. In this report, we will outline Maslow's views on these subjects.

Experiential and Conceptual Understanding

Maslow (1966, 1968) believed that there are certain qualities of reality that can be experienced only intuitively. To apprehend these qualities more fully, it is necessary to make use of "preverbal, ineffable, metaphorical, primary process, concrete, intuitive and aesthetic types of cognition" (Maslow, 1968, p. 209). Maslow (1966) called the capacity to use these sources of information "experiential understanding."

Maslow was also interested in whether the development of experiential understanding sharpens awareness of the limitations of purely abstract thinking, of verbal thinking, and of analytic thinking (Maslow, 1968). These latter types of thinking--referred to as "conceptual understanding" by Maslow--were considered by him to be limited in scope and inadequate to describe reality comprehensively (Maslow, 1966, 1968). Conceptual understanding is limited because any abstract concept, by necessity, leaves something out of the experience it attempts to

delineate. Conceptual understanding "makes us more able to see some things, but less able to see other things" (Maslow, 1968, p. 209).

But focusing entirely on one type of understanding at the expense of the other ignores their innate reciprocity, and is a diminished expression of human capability (Maslow, 1966, 1968). Maslow described a reciprocal and intimate relationship between the two types of understanding as "the greatest maturity, a true integration of the person at all levels" (1968, p. 96).

Maslow (1966) also proposed that a grasp of both types of understanding corresponds with the capacity for transcendent experience:

It seems to be true that there are people whose perspicuity, intuitiveness, and ability to perceive are improved and enriched by education and by knowledge. Somehow they are able to bring nomothetic, abstract, lawful, verbal knowledge to bear upon their experiencing of the individual instance. . . . In the extreme instance it can enhance even the transcendent aspects of reality; the sacred, the mysterious, the miraculous, the awe-inspiring. . . . It's just these people . . . who manage somehow to retain this "experiential naïveté," this creative attitude, this ability to see freshly as a child sees, without a priori expectations or demands, without knowing in advance what they will see. (Maslow, 1966, p. 64)

Experiential understanding and conceptual knowledge were two sides of a mutually collaborative way of apprehending experience (Maslow, 1970). Through a grounding in experiential understanding and an integration of this meaningfulness with conceptual understanding, transcendent possibilities become apparent (Maslow, 1966, 1970, 1971).

Maslow advocated the practice of finding words to describe qualities of inner states; through such practice, he believed, internal and subjective experiences could be brought into conscious awareness (Maslow, 1966, 1968, 1970). It will be useful to consider one approach Maslow took to finding words for the purpose of sharpening experiential awareness--that of "rhapsodic language"--a term coined by Maslow (1970, p. 84). Rhapsodic language describes a method of bridging the domains of experiential and conceptual understanding.

Rhapsodic Language

Maslow (1968) believed that ordinary communication and language are inadequate to describe inner states and intrapsychic phenomena. This inadequacy of ordinary language results from a strong tendency, when assigning meaning to an experience, to relate its attributes to linguistically structured concepts. Under ordinary circumstances, assigning meaning this way poses little difficulty, for

example, in relating to experiences of the concrete and external world. When inner states are the subject of experience, however, this tendency creates a problem because ordinary language is predisposed toward abstractness, whereas inner experience is less subject to conventional boundaries and abstractions. Maslow's (1968) viewpoint concerning this problematic quality of ordinary language can be seen in the following passage:

Abstractions, to the extent that they are useful, are also false. In a word, to perceive an object abstractly means not to perceive some aspects of it. It clearly implies selection of some attributes, rejection of other attributes, creation or distortion of still others. We make of it what we wish. We create it. We manufacture it. Furthermore, extremely important is the strong tendency in abstracting to relate aspects of the object to our linguistic system. This makes special troubles because language is a secondary rather than a primary process in the Freudian sense. . . . It deals with external reality rather than psychic reality, with the conscious rather than the unconscious¹ In the last analysis much of experience is ineffable and can be put into no language at all. (Maslow, 1968, p. 90)

The shortcoming of ordinary language in relationship to inner experience, however, can be compensated for, to some extent, through the use of rhapsodic language (Maslow, 1970).

Rhapsodic language consists of nonstructured communication that makes use of metaphors and poetic expression. When adopting it, one's words and thinking "shift over more and more to figures of speech, metaphors, similes, etc., and . . . more and more to poetic speech"² (Maslow, 1970, p. 84).

In Maslow's use of the term rhapsodic language, the main emphasis is on the recovery of inner experience--in particular, the recovery of information contained in awareness of the "concrete, preabstract, preverbal and unconscious" (Chiang, 1977, p. 231). Awareness of these qualities comprised an essential but suppressed part of human nature in Maslow's view. To be experientially alive meant to renew a contact with this essential nature (Maslow, 1970). With practice, awareness of internal and subjective experiences could be brought into consciousness, into the realm of abstraction and naming, and Maslow advocated the practice of finding words for describing and naming inner states for this purpose (Maslow, 1970). Describing such experiences with rhapsodic language, and finding a way to label the experiences, facilitates repeated contact with such subjective experience (Maslow, 1968, 1970).

When it can be taught that a particular constellation of preverbal, subjective experiences corresponds to a label, e.g., "peak experience" or "anxiety," then it also becomes possible to understand the conditions that brought about these experiences. Until the point at which a conscious, detached awareness of the

relationship between a particular constellation of subjective experiences and a particular cognitive association is reached, however, awareness, communication, and understanding about the experiences will be difficult if not impossible (Maslow, 1966, 1970, 1979).

The relationship between the two modes of understanding Maslow described--experiential and conceptual understanding--has implications for phenomenology and the epistemology of internal events in consciousness. He firmly believed that the two modes were not mutually exclusive and should be considered complementary. Inner states and the rhapsodic language used to render them more recognizable and meaningful were also complementary means of apprehending experience (Maslow, 1970).

It appears that Maslow attached considerable importance to the practical benefits of cultivating rhapsodic language. When interviewing subjects about peak experiences, for example, he usually made deliberate attempts to elicit it (Maslow, 1968, 1970). He also explored the usefulness of rhapsodic language in seminars as an educational method for developing experiential understanding³ (Chiang, 1977; Maslow & Chiang, 1977) and he described rhapsodic language in several publications (Maslow, 1970, 1971, 1979). Maslow was also interested in whether improving experiential awareness with selective forms of conceptual processing could be useful for self-understanding, creativity, and transcendent experience (Chiang, 1977; Maslow, 1968, 1970, 1971).

Transcendent Experience

The last stage of Maslow's career was focused primarily upon transcendent and transpersonal phenomena and, during this period, Maslow revised his need hierarchy to place transcendence at its apex (Roberts, 1978). Individuals who attained this highest level were referred to as transcendents (Maslow, 1971, p. 283). They possessed a spontaneous capability for using rhapsodic language effortlessly⁴ (Maslow, 1966, 1968, 1971). A description of transcendents from Maslow's "Theory Z" paper (Maslow, 1971) provides an example of their capacity for the spontaneous use of metaphoric and poetic language:

They (the transcendents) speak easily, normally, naturally, and unconsciously the language . . . of poets, of mystics, of seers, of profoundly religious men. . . . Therefore, they should better understand parables, figures of speech, paradoxes, music, art, nonverbal communications, etc. (Maslow, 1971, p. 283)

Maslow's (1966, 1968, 1971) assertions that a form of metaphoric and poetic language distinguished the transcendent level of psychological development were consistent with other writings of his on the role of language in transcendent states (Maslow, 1968, 1970, 1971). For example, towards the end of his life, Maslow

began exploring a transcendent state of consciousness he called the "plateau experience"⁵ (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995; Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1970), and there seems to be a connection between rhapsodic language and the plateau experience. The perspective implied by rhapsodic language is consistent with Maslow's descriptions of the plateau experience. For example, in the following description of a plateau experience from an address given at the University of California, Los Angeles, in March of 1970, an element of rhapsodic language can be seen to lend meaningfulness to Maslow's description of how every moment can be precious (*italics added*):

We can sharpen our eyes to . . . the *symbolic*, the *mythic*, the *poetic*, the sense in which a story is a *parable* also (which has far greater meaning than in itself.) . . . This in itself makes life so precious. If I may say it the way I would like to say it, it makes you see the preciousness of life and the essential beauty of the trees and so on. It has very profound effects on a person because he is then living, in a certain sense, in a good world. (International Study Project, 1972, pp. 52-53)

Other statements by Maslow concerning the plateau experience are also consistent with this sense of symbolic and metaphoric awareness: consider Maslow's description of watching the surf at Carmel, California (*italics added*):

My awareness on the beach of the contrast between its permanence and my mortality produced such an intense feeling of the preciousness and beauty of what I was looking at. Maybe death helps to create the feeling of sacralization = unitive consciousness,⁶ plateau, peaks . . . of archetypical, *symbolic*, eternal, transcendent experiences.⁷ (Maslow, 1979, p. 985)

It may also be that the sense of symbolic and metaphoric awareness is what Maslow intended when he referred to cognition in the plateau experience, e.g., "the high plateau experience *always* has a noetic and cognitive element" (Maslow, 1970, p. xiv). But Maslow's descriptions of the plateau experience also describe a component that is not cognitive, but experiential: he uses phrases such as "being reduced to the concrete," and being in the "here and now" (International Study Project, 1972, p. 52).

It appears, therefore, that both cognitive and experiential types of awareness are represented in Maslow's descriptions of the plateau experience. Maslow's writings had in the past included various attempts to describe the value of this dual form of awareness in transcendent experience (Maslow, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1971, 1979).⁸ He coined several terms to describe just such a form of experiencing, including "wise innocence" and "unitive consciousness" (Maslow, 1966, 1968). Both terms were used explicitly to describe the plateau experience (International Study Project, 1972; Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1970, 1979).

Conclusion

Maslow's transpersonal yet intellectual approach to personal growth and states of transcendence was an unusual blend for the time. Rather than discredit the use of words and abstractions, as some in the human potential movement had suggested, Maslow made use of them to facilitate the discovery and awareness of inner experiencing, such as in his advocating the use of rhapsodic language (Maslow, 1968, 1970). Maslow was very interested in the question of whether intellect could be employed to facilitate or sharpen experiential awareness; he believed that a place must be made for this form of awareness if one's goal is to describe the world more fully (Maslow, 1966, 1968). By freely shifting from one mode of knowing to the other, or alternating between the experiential and the conceptual as the occasion may call for, experience, and the communication of experience, can be enriched (Chiang, 1977; Maslow, 1966).

Maslow also advocated making optimal use of experiential and conceptual understanding for improving phenomenological observation and scientific investigation (Maslow, 1966, 1968). In his book, The Psychology of Science (1966), Maslow states:

If you want to see the world, it is obviously sensible to be as good a seer as you can make yourself. The injunction might read then: make yourself into a good instrument of knowledge. Cleanse yourself as you would the lenses of your microscope. (Maslow, 1966, p. 48)

Making oneself "into a good instrument of knowledge" was the most important step forward possible, whether in transcendent experience, personal growth, or scientific investigation.

Maslow did not believe that his more expansive views of scientific method and the study of inner experience were any less valid than conventional approaches. The shortcomings of a purely experiential approach were dangers he well-recognized and was only too aware of (Maslow, 1970), but he believed that such dangers could be averted through sufficient care and judicious study of subjective knowledge (Maslow, 1966, 1968, 1970). He did not believe that such private and subjective knowledge should be regarded as more trustworthy than public and verifiable knowledge (Maslow, 1966, p. 47). But he did claim that the balance of conventional scientific opinion in psychology had shifted too far toward narrowly defined verifiable knowledge, forsaking important problems simply because they seemed difficult to manage by conventional and entrenched canons of psychological inquiry. He argued that scientists relied too heavily on conventional logic and method rather than on intuition, and that a new balance needed to be struck (Maslow, 1966).

Partly to strike a new balance, Maslow gave support to the value of experiential understanding⁹ in his public statements and in his leadership role within the humanistic psychology movement in the 1960s. Nevertheless, in championing the value of experiential understanding, Maslow did not elevate it to an exclusive status: "Experiential knowledge is [the] sine qua non, but not all, i.e., it is necessary, but not sufficient. . . . We can avoid the trap of dichotomizing experiential knowledge from and against conceptual knowledge" (Maslow, 1966, p. 46).

Although Maslow advocated the value of experiential knowledge, his approach differed considerably from those who advocated experientialism solely. His position on the usefulness of the intellect to sharpen self-awareness was probably unpopular among some, perhaps even many, of his contemporaries in the humanistic psychology movement and with the prevailing counterculture of the 1960s (Chiang, 1977).¹⁰ But Maslow's life was dedicated to opening doors to the farther reaches of human nature, and expanding the art of apprehending experience and understanding.

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NOTES

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1. According to Chiang (1977), Maslow's co-facilitator in a seminar in which issues related to rhapsodic language were explored, Maslow used the word unconscious in a way that was synonymous with the preconscious, but did distinguish between the two.

Maslow considered the unconscious to be the seat of drives and needs--especially irrational needs--whereas he considered the preconscious to have more to do with sensing and perceiving. Characteristics of preconscious sensing included in his descriptions were feelings, subtle impulses, primary process cognitions, intuitions, and aesthetic perceiving. Maslow's descriptions were not intended to be exhaustive, as he pointed out (Maslow, 1968). The aspect that interested him primarily, however, and which he probably refers to in the quotation, is generally known as the preconscious (Chiang, 1977).

2. One way in which Maslow described rhapsodic language was as a spontaneous flow of free-association:

[Rhapsodic language is] free association really, metaphorical, figure of speech kind of talk; what I call in my own journal "rhapsodic" talk rather than just straight, logical, sensible talk. It seems very real and very clear, yet the explaining or describing of it would be quite difficult. (Maslow & Chiang, 1977, p. 241)

3. In a seminar taught at Brandeis University in 1964, for example, Maslow attempted to implement this type of communication with a group of 25 undergraduates. By exposing the seminar students to the experiential reports of peak experiences, he hoped responsive chords might be struck. Maslow often read an example of a peak experience from a collection of reports he had gathered from research subjects, making comments as he went along, and encouraging personal responses from the class. The goal of the course was the recovery of experiences of the "emotions, subtle impulses, and inner voices" (Chiang & Maslow, 1977, p. 230).

4. Maslow sometimes used the term synergy to describe this spontaneous capability (1968, p. 208).

5. Hoffman (1988) offers the following succinct definition of a plateau experience:

A serene and calm, rather than intensely emotional, response to what we experience as miraculous or awesome. The high plateau always has a noetic and cognitive element, unlike the peak experience, which can be merely emotional; it is also far more volitional than the peak experience; for example, a mother who sits quietly gazing at her baby playing on the floor beside her. (p. 340)

For a more comprehensive characterization of the plateau experience, see Cleary (1995), Cleary and Shapiro (1995), or Maslow's own description (in Krippner, 1972).

6. Maslow claimed that this quality of unitive consciousness was characteristic of mystics and self-actualizing people (Maslow, 1971, 1979).

7. Consider, as well, the following two sets of parallel passages (*italics added*):

(1) The plateau experience . . . involves seeing the *symbolic*, or the *mythic*, the *poetic*, the transcendent, the miraculous, the unbelievable. (Krippner, 1972, p. 115)

(2) [In rhapsodic language] expression and communication become *poetic*, *mythical* and *rhapsodic*, as if this were a natural kind of language to express such states of being. (Maslow, 1968, p. 110)

and,

(1) [In the plateau experience, one perceives] under the aspect of eternity and becomes *mythic*, *poetic*, and *symbolic* about ordinary things. (Krippner, 1972, p. 113)

(2) [In rhapsodic language, one uses] figures of speech, metaphors, similes, etc., and, in general . . . *poetic* speech. (Maslow, 1970, p. 84)

Other, comparable statements exist. Notwithstanding these obvious parallels in descriptive phrasing, Maslow did not explicitly refer to rhapsodic language in his work on the plateau experience.

8. Of this grasp of both types of awareness in transcendent experience, Maslow (1971) stated:

It is nothing new. Any reader of Zen, Taoistic, or mystical literature knows what I am talking about. Every mystic has tried to describe this vividness and particularity of the concrete object and, at the same time, its eternal, sacred, symbolic quality. (p. 115)

9. Although Maslow supported growth centers like Esalen which emphasized experiential techniques of awareness, he had misgivings "that Esalen was becoming increasingly enamored with experiential methods to quicken self-actualization, and pulling away from intellectual rigor" (Hoffman, 1988, pp. 284-285).

10. Psychologists prominent in the human potential movement, such as Fritz Perls, had gone to the point of treating the intellect with suspicion and disdain (Shepard, 1975). Maslow did not oppose experiential encounters in principle, but he viewed them only as techniques for personal development, rather than as a way of life, which some advocates apparently took them to be (Maslow, 1979). Moreover, experiential techniques did not necessarily contribute to the progress of those who seek transcendent states of consciousness (Maslow, 1979). Some members of one of Maslow's university seminars in the late 1960s were critical of the course for not having a greater experiential focus. A revealing debate ensued about intrinsic vs. extrinsic education (humanistic education vs. professional training for teachers) (Maslow, 1969a, 1969b). More generally, Maslow was not pleased with what he perceived as a narcissistic abuse of some of his ideas by the hippie culture of the 1960s (Hoffman, 1988).