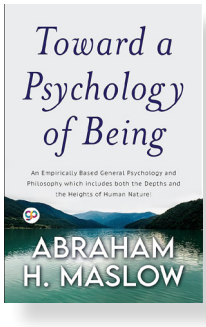

Toward a Psychology of Being

Abraham Maslow

> **"Self-actualizing people, those who have come to a high level of maturation, health, and self-fulfillment, have so much to teach us that sometimes they seem almost like a different breed of human beings." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

In Toward a Psychology of Being (1968), the American psychologist Abraham Maslow challenges the modus operandi of modern psychology. Instead of focusing on what is broken, he directs attention to the highest potentials of man and the innate capacity for growth and self-actualization.

> **"…it is as if Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half. Perhaps this health psychology will give us more possibility for controlling and improving our lives and for making ourselves better people. Perhaps this will be more fruitful than asking "how to get unsick."" (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Human Nature is Inherently Good

According to Maslow, each of us is born with an "inner nature", which consists of a set of innate talents, potentials, and character traits. We are not, in other words, a blank slate at birth, fully shaped by our environment. Instead our inner nature predisposes us to the development of a certain type of personality.

> **"We have, each one of us, an essential inner nature which is instinctoid, intrinsic, given, "natural," i.e., with an appreciable hereditary determinant, and which tends strongly to persist…This inner core shows itself as natural inclinations, propensities or inner bent…This raw material very quickly starts growing into a self as it meets the world outside and begins to have transaction with it." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

In contrast to some religions and philosophies which portray man as fallen creature, and corrupt by nature, Maslow argues that our inner nature is "good" in the sense that it is fundamentally oriented toward growth and health.

> **"This inner nature, as much as we know of it so far, is definitely not "evil," but is either what we adults in our culture call "good," or else it is neutral. The most accurate way to express this is to say that it is "prior to good and evil." ... That is, it has a dynamic force of its own, pressing always for open, uninhibited expression…This force is one main aspect of the "will to health," the urge to grow." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Many educational philosophies treat the child as something to be shaped, molded, and disciplined from without. Maslow, in contrast, suggests that what we need to flourish is a healthy environment that offers us the support and freedom to actualize our innate potentials.

> **"The sources of growth and of humanness are essentially within the human person and are not created or invented by society, which can only help or hinder the development of humanness,**

> **just as a gardener can help or hinder the growth of a rosebush, but cannot determine that it shall be an oak tree." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

And as he continues:

> **"A teacher or a culture doesn't create a human being. It doesn't implant within him the ability to love, or to be curious, or to philosophize, or to symbolize, or to be creative. Rather it permits, or fosters, or encourages or helps what exists in embryo to become real and actual…The culture is sun and food and water: it is not the seed." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Self-Actualization

When a child is raised in a healthy family and social environment, he naturally moves toward what Abraham Maslow termed self-actualization. Self-actualization being the ongoing process of realizing one's full potential and becoming one's most authentic self. Maslow was not the first thinker to formulate the idea of self-actualization, but it was through his work that this term entered the cultural zeitgeist.

> **"This is called variously by different authors self-actualization, self-realization, integration, psychological health, individuation, autonomy, creativity, productivity, but they all agree that this amounts to realizing the potentialities of the person, that is to say, becoming fully human, everything that the person can become…We then have a parallel to the unobstructed blooming of a flower or to the singing of birds. This is the way in which an apple tree bears apples, without striving or effort, simply as an expression of its own inherent nature." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Since self-actualization emerges when an individual's inner nature is allowed to unfold freely, it is the natural end toward which a human life is directed. In Plato's Republic, Socrates asks the age-old question: what is the purpose of life? For Abraham Maslow, the answer lies in actualizing one's inner potentials - in becoming what one is capable of being. In this sense, his view aligns with that of Friedrich Nietzsche, who urged us to "become who you are."

> **"We can certainly now assert that…within the human being is a tendency toward, or need for growing in a direction that can be summarized in general as self-actualization, or psychological health…i.e., he has within him a pressure toward unity of personality, toward spontaneous expressiveness, toward full individuality and identity, toward seeing the truth rather than being blind, toward being creative, toward being good, and a lot else." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Why Does Man So Often Turn out Wrong?

If it is in our nature to self-actualize, why do so few of us accomplish this most important task?

> **"Though, in principle, self-actualization is easy, in practice it rarely happens (by my criteria, certainly in less than 1% of the adult population)." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

The sick state of modern society is a primary reason why self-actualized men and women are so rare. From dysfunctional family dynamics, such as one-parent households, to an educational system that rewards obedience, conformity, and rote learning over creativity and independent thought, to a value system that elevates the accumulation of wealth, status, power and fame over authenticity of self, the impediments to the natural unfolding of our inner nature are many.

> **"Sick people are made by a sick culture; healthy people are made possible by a healthy culture." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

And as Maslow continues:

> **"There is a special tendency in Western culture...to assume that these instinctoid needs of the human being, his so-called animal nature, are bad or evil. As a consequence, many cultural institutions are set up for the express purpose of controlling, inhibiting, suppressing, and repressing this original nature of man." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Fear of One's Own Potential

Another reason many fail to walk the path of self-actualization is that they fear their own potential. Maslow referred to this fear as the Jonah Complex, which he named after the biblical character Jonah who fled the destiny God set for him.

> **"If we wish to help humans to become more fully human, we must realize not only that they try to realize themselves but that they are also reluctant or afraid to do so." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

To self-actualize we must be willing to let go of our need for social validation to follow the life path that allows us to unfold our unique potential. And this is a daunting task. For we not only fear the wasted life that comes from too much conformity, but we also fear standing out from the crowd and realizing too much of our potential. We are infected with a lingering sense that if we rise above others we will be struck down by our hubris. "The nail that sticks out will get hammered down", says the Japanese proverb.

Myths across different cultures convey this fear. Icarus is struck down for flying too close to the sun. Adam and Eve are punished for eating the fruit of knowledge, while Prometheus is condemned for stealing fire from the gods. Such stories reflect the universal intuition that there is something dangerous inherent in striving for greatness.

> **"…it is precisely the god-like in ourselves that we are ambivalent about, fascinated by and fearful of, motivated to and defensive against… Every one of our great creators, our god-like people, has testified to the element of courage that is needed in the lonely moment of creation, affirming something new (contradictory to the old). This is a kind of daring, a going out in front all alone, a defiance, a challenge…Thus to discover in oneself a great talent can certainly bring exhilaration but it also brings a fear of the dangers and responsibilities and duties of being a leader and of being all alone. Responsibility can be seen as a heavy burden and evaded as long as possible." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

When our Inner Nature is not Actualized - Neurosis Results

Whether because of fear, a sick culture, or a pathological upbringing, failure to self-actualize results in psychological disturbances and neuroses.

> **"If this essential core (inner nature) of the person is frustrated, denied or suppressed, sickness results, sometimes in obvious forms, sometimes in subtle and devious forms, sometimes immediately, sometimes later…That is, general-illness of the personality is seen as any falling short of growth, or of self-actualization, or of full-humanness." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Our Inner Nature Does Not Disappear

Even if our inner nature has been frustrated, denied, or suppressed, it remains a dormant seed, awaiting the conditions upon which it can emerge.

> **"Even though weak, [the inner core] rarely disappears in the normal person—perhaps not even in the sick person. Even though denied, it persists underground forever pressing for actualization." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

How to Self-Actualize - Study Healthy People

While Abraham Maslow maintained that self-actualization is a task each person must undertake for himself, he believed that by studying those who have achieved it we can better understand both what the process entails and how to accomplish it.

> **"The study of such healthy people can teach us much about our own mistakes, our shortcomings, the proper directions in which to grow. Every age but ours has had its model, its ideal. All of these have been given up by our culture; the saint, the hero, the gentleman, the knight, the mystic." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

This approach appeals to common sense. If we want to know how to hit a better forehand in tennis, or become a better golfer, we mimic the experts. Likewise, if we want to become a more flourishing human being, we should learn from and to some degree imitate self-actualizing individuals.

> **"Few in number though they be, we can learn a great deal from the direct study of these highly evolved, most mature, psychologically healthiest individuals...Perhaps we shall soon be able to use as our guide and model the fully growing and self-fulfilling human being, the one in whom all his potentialities are coming to full development, the one whose inner nature expresses itself freely, rather than being warped, suppressed, or denied." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Peak Experiences

One characteristic of self-actualizing individuals is that they organize their lives around intrinsically rewarding activities. In other words, they spend much of their time absorbed in work, hobbies and vocations that generate what Maslow called peak experiences.

Peak experiences arise when we are totally absorbed in a rewarding task. In these experiences the sense of time fades, self-consciousness dissipates, worries disappear, and action flows effortlessly. Such experiences are among the most profound sources of joy. For in a peak experience we are not driven by a feeling of lack, nor oriented toward some future end. Instead, we are fully engaged in the moment and we feel complete and at the height of our powers. According to Maslow, in such moments we become a force of nature - almost godlike – as we act with clarity, creativity, and power.

> **"Though we can never be gods in this sense, we can be more godlike or less godlike, more often or less often." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

And as Maslow continues:

> **"The person in peak-experiences feels himself, more than at other times, more like a prime mover, more self-determined (rather than caused, determined, helpless, dependent, passive, weak, bossed) … He is at his best, at concert pitch, at the top of his form…He becomes like a river without dams. What takes effort, straining and struggling at other times is now done**

> **without any sense of striving, of working or laboring, but "comes of itself." Allied to this often is the feeling of grace and the look of grace that comes with smooth, easy, effortless fully-functioning, when everything "clicks," or "is in the groove," or is "in overdrive."" (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Self-Actualizers Need Privacy and Solitude

While relationships are a primary source of life's meaning and joy, they are not a psychological necessity for self-actualizing individuals. In fact, Abraham Maslow observed that the healthiest among us often have a pronounced need for privacy and solitude. They often withdraw into their work, their thoughts, or the quiet of nature - spending long stretches alone, only to emerge not depleted, but renewed and invigorated.

> **"Far from needing other people, self-actualizing people may actually be hampered by them. They also show a surprising amount of detachment from people in general and a strong liking for privacy, even a need for it...This relative independence of the outside world and its wishes and pressures, does not mean of course, lack of intercourse with it...It means only that in these contacts, the self-actualizer's wishes and plans are the primary determiners, rather than stresses from the environment. This I have called psychological freedom." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Self-Actualizers are Independent from Society

Because they spend much of their time in solitude and are primarily focused on unfolding their potential rather than fitting in, self-actualizers are also independent from society. This psychological independence from society allows them to see clearly the elements of society that are sick and misguided. Rather than following these uncritically, and becoming sick themselves, self-actualizers choose which cultural values and practices to adopt, which to reject, and which to oppose. As a result, they are much less shaped by society than other people

> **"In practically all self-actualizing individuals, I found a rather calm, good-humored rejection of the stupidities and imperfections of the culture with greater or lesser effort at improving it. They definitely showed an ability to fight it vigorously when they thought it necessary…He resists enculturation. He becomes more detached from his culture and from his society." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Self-Actualizers Suffer, but their Suffering is Purposeful

Although the lives of self-actualizers are permeated by feelings of joy and fulfillment, they are not exempt from suffering. Rather, pain, conflict, and distress remain integral aspects of their life.

> **"Struggle, conflict, guilt, bad conscience, anxiety, depression, frustration, tension, shame, self-punishment, feeling of inferiority or unworthiness...all of these symptoms are found also in healthy people, or in people who are growing toward health." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

What distinguishes self-actualizing individuals is how they suffer. Their distress is not pathological, but appropriate. It arises when suffering is the fitting response to inner conflict or external injustice. In this sense, the suffering of self-actualized individuals is a sign of health, not sickness: it is an indication that something is inhibiting the unfolding of their inner nature, and that such a nature is active and oriented towards growth.

> **"Supposing you should feel guilty and don't?…To be untroubled when one should be troubled can be a sign of sickness." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**

Because suffering can be a sign that something is inhibiting the unfolding of our inner nature, we should not deny it or numb ourselves to it. When we suffer, we should sit with it, allow it, and listen to it, and use it as a guide to help propel us onto the path of self-actualization.

> **"He who belies his talent, the born painter who sells stockings instead, the intelligent man who lives a stupid life, the man who sees the truth and keeps his mouth shut, the coward who gives up his manliness, all these people perceive in a deep way that they have done wrong to themselves and despise themselves for it. Out of this self-punishment may come only neurosis, but there may equally well come renewed courage, righteous indignation, increased self-respect, because of thereafter doing the right thing; in a word, growth and improvement can come through pain and conflict." (Toward a Psychology of Being)**