

Making Sense of Behavior: *The Meaning of Control*

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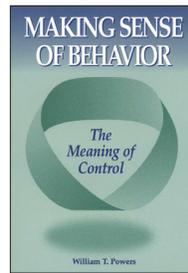
Bill Powers is virtually unknown outside a very small community of people interested in applying control theory to understanding human behavior, an activity that can be traced back to Norbert Wiener's influential work in the 1940's. Powers' obscurity is particularly unfortunate because his work is truly revolutionary and deserves a much wider audience. In this book he gives a typically lucid presentation of the basics of his application of control theory to understanding everyday behavior. It's a wonderfully clear exposition of his ideas and provides invaluable insights into what makes us tick. Perhaps in the next millennium academic psychology will catch up to Powers. Until this happens, you couldn't ask for a better guide than this engaging book.

Bruce Gregory 1999

If you buy only one book this year it should be *Making Sense of Behavior* by William T. Powers. Powers' book is subtitled *The Meaning of Control* and in it he presents, in plain and persuasive language, his view of human beings and their behavior. His view? We are all "autonomous control systems - it is our nature to seek goals and oppose disturbances [to the attainment and maintenance of our goals]."

In his book Powers does what other theorists and theories don't, namely, he gives us an explanation of the human phenomenon that is technically satisfying and, at the same time, an explanation that resonates with our deeply held notions about ourselves. Who won't like this book? The same pompous airbags who have seen fit to saddle us all with one empty-headed theory after another about the nature of human beings and their behavior. The truth, like quality and beauty, is something we all know when we see it. You'll recognize the truth in Powers' book.

Powers is no intellectual slouch. An engineer by training and a scientist by calling, his approach is as intellectually demanding and as scientifically rigorous



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Benchmark, Bloomfield, NJ.
www.benchpress.com/Books2.htm
978-0-9647121-5-7 (paperback)

By William T. Powers

as any to be found. Nor is his theory of recent or easy vintage. He has been hard at work developing it for almost half a century. He first articulated it in a 1973 book titled *Behavior: The Control of Perception* and he has elaborated it in various papers since then.

Powers' central thesis is simple enough: All we know of our world we know through our perceptions. We act, then, not to control the world but to control our perceptions of it. Hence, behavior as the control of perception. Best of all, Powers provides a simple, elegant experiment requiring nothing more than two rubber bands and two people that we can use to test his theory. It is difficult to argue with.

So what? What are the practical implications of Powers' theory? Well, for one thing, the transactions between employer and employee need to be negotiated instead of commanded or demanded. If that seems obvious, consider this: for the most part, so do the transactions between parent - or teacher - and child. Remember, we are - all of us - "autonomous control systems," even the children among us. For another, Powers offers an interesting if not novel approach to conflict resolution, namely, taking it "up a level." (I leave to the readers of Powers' book the fun of discovering of what that means.) Finally, in the midst of all this autonomy is the unavoidable conclusion that we are inescapably accountable for our own behavior. (Management will both love and hate that one.)

The bottom line of Powers' message is plain and profound: I am in control of me. That's all there is and that's enough. Moreover, the inevitable consequence of attempting to control others is conflict.

Frederick W. Nickols 2000

Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is a type of talking treatment. It's based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), but has been adapted to help people who experience emotions very intensely. It's mainly used to treat problems associated with borderline personality disorder (BPD), but it has also been used more recently to treat a number of other different types of mental health problems (see Is DBT right for me?). What's the difference between DBT and CBT? CBT focuses on helping you to change unhelpful ways of thinking and behaving. Acceptance techniques focus on understanding yourself as a person, and making sense of why you might do things such as self-harm or misuse drugs.