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The Psychology of Controlling Control

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This is a political world, i.e., a world with finite resources, infinite need, and conflict the ineluctable currency of human life. Conflict? To somehow reach a tolerable disparity between the real and the ideal--between what one has or is and what one wants to have or be. For an instant to experience no disparity. But one of the bemusing features of the human condition--from an evolutionary and/or Sacred perspective--is that even an instant is unattainable and can only be related to asymptotically. One's power is one's moment to moment ability and motivation to manage this conflict.

Techniques for developing, obtaining, maintaining power are many. And many involve the psychological concept of control--to regulate, direct, or influence oneself and others through thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors. All of us, then, are politicians--lay or professional--seeking power, often through control. This ongoing quest has been the focus of many classics in political philosophy from the Old Testament, The Chan Kuo'Tse, the Arthasastra, the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun, to The Prince. It, perhaps, always has been the focus of presidents, prime ministers, kings, and queens, and potentates of all sorts--and according to some psychologists, the focus of all of us. And from the sublime to the ridiculous, most of us have been found wanting. Hanging onto power even for those who have or have had some significant amount to hang onto has been a most precarious enterprise.

Ample psychological research suggests that control--in the political sense the controlling of control--is difficult because there is so much to control. Just for one person there is at least (a) the positive correlation of impaired control mechanisms--i.e., actual control, and degree of psychopathology; (b) the positive correlation between an overestimated sense of control and so-called psychological normality--which eventually reaches first a law of diminishing returns and then a negative correlation perhaps similar to the Yerkes-Dodson law relating performance and arousal; (c) the positive correlation between sense of control and positive outcome from medical disorder and degree of physical health; (d) the match or mismatch between sense of control and preferred control mechanisms and the control demands, threats, or opportunities of specific environments, situations, or other people; (e) the often unpredictable correlation of illusory control with positive, negative, even no consequences; (f) the many varieties of sense of control-- e.g., beliefs, opinions, attitudes, expectancies; (g) the many varieties of sense of control content areas or domains--e.g., life, personal life, getting to the church on time, control of or from self or others; (h) the many temporal domains of sense of control--e.g., all of one's life, during peak experiences, on the night of the full moon, winter, spring, summer or fall; (i) the relationship of actual control and sense of control to each other and to a host of significant psychological variables; (j) the relationship of actual and sense of control to cosmological and ideological beliefs--to some these beliefs being congruent with or identical to varieties of control; (k) the evolutionary psychology and sociobiological contributions to actual and sense of control as defined by molecular genetic content, structure, function, and process. And all of this and more interacting between and among people. What a challenge for the would-be controller.

These and other control issues may well be at the root of ever-difficult political questions of rulers, governors, officials, and--yes--the rest of us. What does "freedom" mean? How much freedom can we tolerate or tolerate giving to others? Would empirically demonstrated differences in control among

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racial, ethnic, or geographically separated groups serve as a legitimate rationale for radically different political structures, e.g., "Western" versus "Eastern" democracies? What are the optimal combinations of the positive and negative reinforcement, punishment, and omission training--the four main classes of human conditioning--of others to maintain one's power? From the ruler and the ruled perspective how to handle a Tianamen Square situation? South Korean labor dissension? Hostage taking in Lima? Serbian opposition defiance in Belgrade and Nis?

The problem for the would-be controllers of history is that there is so much to control in oneself and others. Perhaps the intractability of this problem is a saving grace even if the human condition stems from the Fall. (See Ibn Khaldun. (c. 1379/1996.) In C. Issawi (Trans. & Ed.) *An Arab philosophy of history: Selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun of Tunis*. London: Murray; Liu Hsiang (c. 20/1996.) In J. I. Crump (Trans.) *Chan-Kuo-Ts'e*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies; Machiavelli, N. (c. 1513/1940.) *The Prince*. NY: Modern Library; Shamasastri, R. (1909.) *Kautilya's Arthasastra*. Mysore: Wesleyan Mission Press; Shapiro, D. H., Schwartz, C. E., & Astin, J. A. (1996.) *Controlling ourselves, controlling our world*. *American Psychologist*, 51, 1213-1230.) (Keyword: Control)