Toward a Psychology of Being

What’s in it for me? Explore Maslow’s profound theory of growth and self-actualization.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow lived and worked throughout the early and mid-twentieth century. At that time, his field was primarily focused on pathology – what Maslow called the “sick half of psychology.” Though Maslow believed that half was important, he also grew increasingly frustrated that the other, equally important half of the discipline – what you might call the “healthy” half – had been ignored. For Maslow, psychology wasn’t just about moving away from sickness – it was also about moving toward health. Maslow ultimately rejected the terms “sick” and “healthy” as too culturally relative. Instead, he settled on the term self-actualization to describe the process of individual psychological growth – a process he believed was humankind’s shared biological destiny. So what exactly is self-actualization? Dive into these blinks and find out. In these blinks, you’ll learn

why so few people become self-actualized; what constitutes a peak experience; and how societies could be restructured around self-actualization.

Humans have an innate need to self-actualize.

Do you, like many philosophers have over the years, believe in the concept of human nature? Abraham Maslow certainly did – but his vision of it was unique. Unlike other philosophies, his didn’t require recourse to some higher authority like God. It just required a deep understanding of human psychology. Maslow felt that people’s inner nature could be studied scientifically – discovered rather than just theorized about. Maslow believed each person has an inner nature that’s partially individual and partially shared with the rest of humankind. It’s not strong or overpowering, like animal instinct, and it’s intrinsically neutral or good, not evil. As a consequence, it should be encouraged to grow rather than suppressed. This instinctual drive is what Maslow called self-actualization. The key message here is: Humans have an innate need to self-actualize. From Maslow’s perspective, people’s inner nature – their drive toward self-actualization – constantly pressures them to express it. People deeply desire to fulfill their greatest potential and talents. They want to realize their missions, fates, or vocations; they want to become more internally unified, integrated, and synergized. In short, they want to know who they are. However, many people repeatedly deny their drive to self-actualize – and illness is often the result. Every time people deny their natures, Maslow believed, that denial gets recorded in their unconscious. If a person has a natural inclination to be an artist and he chooses to sell socks instead, that’s a denial of his nature – for which he’ll end up despising himself. Similarly, if someone is intelligent but repeatedly hides it so she doesn’t intimidate others, she’s denying her nature and will also come to despise herself. These repeated instances eventually result in pathologies or neuroses. Unfortunately, in Maslow’s time, psychology tended to be hyperfocused on those pathologies and neuroses. Its job was to cure people and make them “not sick” – not necessarily to make them healthy. It was under these conditions that Maslow set out to develop a new form of psychology – one that studied the traits,

habits, and choices of healthy, self-actualizing people. He called this a psychology of Being, with a capital B. Nowadays, it's more commonly referred to as positive psychology. Maslow believed that self-actualization was humanity's shared destiny – something that each individual human and humanity as a whole could achieve. But, paradoxically, he also estimated that very few individuals do ultimately become self-actualized – just one in a hundred or even one in two hundred. The next blink will look at why.

People's deficiency needs must be met before they can grow.

What makes people neurotic? In Maslow's view, it tends to stem from deprivation. Obviously, all human beings have needs. When they're deprived of things like water, calcium, or vitamin C, for example, people get sick. But their needs don't stop there; they also include things like safety, a sense of belonging, love, respect, and prestige. When those needs aren't fulfilled, people become not physically ill, but neurotic. If you're not convinced, there's long-term research backing this up. One of Maslow's studies compared the family backgrounds of neurotic and healthy people. Perhaps unsurprisingly, people who are healthy later in life tend not to have been deprived of their basic psychological needs early on. Maslow called these basic needs deficiency needs – and when they remain unsatisfied, growth is impossible. Here's the key message: People's deficiency needs must be met before they can grow. According to Maslow, human needs are organized in a hierarchy, with different groups of needs resting upon one another. The needs at the base of the hierarchy are things like food and safety. In the middle are needs involving other people – things like love and respect. And at the top rests the need for self-actualization. It's important to note that you can't just charge up and down the pyramid, satisfying needs in any order you want. Before you can gratify your need for love, you have to gratify your need for safety. And before you can gratify your need for self-actualization, you have to gratify your need for love. Equally important is that these needs are integrated, meaning that the higher needs always rest upon the continued gratification of the lower needs. If one of your lower needs stops being gratified for whatever reason, you'll probably feel the urge to make sure it's satisfied again before you can return your attention to higher needs. To illustrate, imagine a child who starts out by clinging to his mother's skirt. Soon, he begins to understand that he can venture away from her while still remaining safe. He then feels free to toddle out and start picking things up, playing with them, and generally exploring the world. If something happens that makes the child feel unsafe, though – then it's straight back to mom until the perceived danger is gone. In the same way, people can only grow when they no longer feel threatened by their deficiency needs. But wait – what exactly is growth, anyway? The next blink will talk about that in detail.

Growth is about ends, not means.

Think back to the last time you felt strongly motivated to do something. Did that mental state feel annoying or undesirable, like something you wanted to get rid of as quickly as possible? If so, you were motivated by a deficiency need. In other words, you felt threatened by a lack of something, and wanted to get rid of, deny, or avoid that feeling. You sought a return to equilibrium. But what if you actually liked how that motivated

state felt, to the point where you didn't want it to end? In that case, you had a growth mindset, with no desire to return to equilibrium – you just wanted to keep going. The essential difference between these two kinds of motivation is that deficiency motivation presses toward its own end, while growth motivation is an end in itself. The key message is this: Growth is about ends, not means. Perhaps the greatest difference between deficiency motivation and growth motivation is in the way they enable people to see the world. Growth-motivated people are much more likely to perceive in a need-disinterested way – that is, without desire. Practically speaking, this means that such people can look past their own desires to see the intrinsic nature of things – things in and of themselves. As one example, consider love. Love is a lower deficiency-need that can only be satisfied by other people. When motivated by this need, a person is dependent on his environment – specifically, on the people supplying him with love. He has to monitor his behavior constantly so he doesn't risk losing them, which makes him both anxious and unable to see other people as ends rather than means. The self-actualizing person, on the other hand, is far less dependent on and beholden to her environment. She's much more autonomous and self-directed, and she no longer sees people as need-gratifiers whose importance rests on their usefulness to her. Instead, she sees people as the whole, complicated, unique individuals that they are, and her love for them is based on their objective, intrinsic qualities. In other words, self-actualizing people see others as ends rather than means. Maslow called this form of love B-love – that is, love for the Being of the other person. It stands in opposition to D-love, which is love that hinges upon a need that the other person satisfies for you. B-love is part of a subset of B-values, which we'll discuss next.

Self-actualizing people experience a high frequency of peak experiences.

Self-actualizing people's impressive achievements aren't all that sets them apart. Their motivational and cognitive lives are also very different from other people's. The psychological states that characterize them are what Maslow calls states of Being. We've already discussed the difference between B-love – love for the Being of a person or object – and D-love. The experience of B-love is characterized by a particular type of cognition, which Maslow calls a Cognition of Being, or B-cognition. Though he first observed B-cognition in the context of love, Maslow came to realize that B-cognition is also present in a wide variety of other experiences, which he generalized under the name peak experiences. The key message here is: Self-actualizing people experience a high frequency of peak experiences. Peak experiences feel like moments of ecstasy or rapture. They might come about when you're falling in love, engaged in a creative act, or experiencing an intellectual insight. You could also experience one when a piece of music, a painting, or a literary work really hits you with full force. During a peak experience, you're in a state of B-cognition. In B-cognition, you tend to see an experience or object as a whole, detached from any notions of usefulness or purpose. You see the world as if it were independent from you and human beings in general. If the peak experience is in nature, for instance, you see the landscape as an end in itself – not as some kind of human playground. Another important aspect of B-cognition is that categorization, classification, and abstraction fall away. Say you're looking at a painting. The moment you think about its subject as, for example, a "foreigner," you've classified him, cutting yourself off from the possibility of seeing him as a unique and whole human being. This doesn't happen in B-cognition. In B-cognition, a person is open to multiple, and even contradictory, impressions. You see things in all their complexity – and you

tend to see yourself in this way, too. Self-actualizing people understand that they are many things simultaneously: adult and child, selfish and unselfish, rational and irrational. In this way, self-actualizing people really do attain an almost superhuman perspective. But you don't need to be fully self-actualizing in order to have peak experiences. In fact, it's during peak experiences that you temporarily become a self-actualizer. Essentially, they're episodes that bring you closer to Being – and they can come about at any point during your life.

Self-actualizing creativity is distinct from typical creativity.

If the history of art makes one thing clear, it's that creativity, talent, and genius are not synonymous with good health. Some of the world's greatest artists have been psychologically unhealthy individuals – just think of Wagner, Van Gogh, or Byron. To Maslow, it seemed that health and genius were separate, and that any correlation between them was likely to be weak. So how could he then interpret his observation that self-actualizing people are truly psychologically healthy, and because of that, exhibit much greater creativity than others? He could only conclude that the kind of creativity the self-actualized exhibit is unique. Here's the key message: Self-actualizing creativity is distinct from typical creativity. When studying self-actualization, Maslow started out by assuming that creativity only belonged in the arts. But among his self-actualizing subjects was a woman who had no traditional job and little education. She was a full-time housewife and mother, and she wasn't engaged in anything traditionally considered creative. Yet even with little money at her disposal, she always managed to make her home look beautiful, she served incredible banquet dinners, and she was an excellent hostess. In these areas, she was original, ingenious, and inventive. The only word Maslow could use to describe her was – you guessed it – "creative." Maslow also realized that mere association with a creative profession does not itself make someone creative. A cellist, for instance, is not creative just because his profession is associated with the arts. He may, in fact, just be a technically skilled interpreter of a composer's creative work. Together, these revelations led Maslow to posit a special category called self-actualizing creativity – SA creativity for short. SA creativity is defined by perceptiveness, spontaneity, and expression, as well as by how it combines seemingly unrelated things in new ways. Works created by people with SA creativity are more likely to take the form of jazz improvisations or abstract paintings than concertos or carefully rendered landscapes. In a way, this makes SA creativity more similar to the kind of creativity that children exhibit, which is spontaneous, expressive, and innocent. This indicates that SA creativity is closer to the core of human nature – innate potential that all human beings are born with, but that gets buried as they grow older. What enables this creativity in self-actualizing people? Maslow thought it might be their relative lack of fear. Because self-actualizing people are not acutely worried about jeopardizing their relationships with other people, they're freer to engage with their spontaneous impulses and emotions – and thus freer to express their deeper selves.

Society could derive a value system from the choices of self-actualizers.

For thousands of years, people have attempted to construct a value system derived from

human nature. They've put forth a lot of theories – and in practical terms, all of these have failed. When Maslow was writing, society seemed to be no less sick than it had been in the past. What's more, its heroes had all disappeared. In the past, cultures had aspirational figures like saints, heroes, knights, or mystics. In both Maslow's time and today, the paragon to aim for – if there is one at all – is the well-adjusted person who has no problems. Not exactly inspiring, is it? Here's where the theory of self-actualization comes in. If self-actualization really is the destiny of humankind, self-actualizing people could become society's new heroes. Average people could model their choices after the choices of self-actualizers, which would in turn increase the health of society as a whole. The key message is this: Society could derive a value system from the choices of self-actualizers. To get to a healthier society, its values first need to be reorganized. But that's no small task. For starters, it's necessary to answer this question: What basis is there for thinking that self-actualizing people make better choices than everyone else? Well, experiments have proven that many types of animals have an inborn ability to select a beneficial diet. Given a free choice among several options, they tend to choose diets that match their needs. Of course, this isn't a perfect mechanism, but it works as a general principle. Human babies have remarkably attuned internal wisdom regarding their dietary, sleep, and activity needs, too – for the most part, anyway. Not everyone is an innately good "chooser." Among adults, there are good choosers and bad choosers, and not just among adult humans: in chickens, the ability to choose a proper diet varies widely. The good choosers become larger, stronger, and more dominant than the bad choosers. And if the good choosers' diet is forced upon the bad choosers, they become bigger, stronger, healthier, and more dominant than they otherwise would have. It remains to be empirically proven whether the same could apply to human beings. But if so, there are some big implications. As it stands, society is modeled after the choices of neurotic people – which can really only tell us how to keep our neuroses stable. The alternative is to observe what the "best" human specimens choose, assuming that these are the highest values for all humankind. Their choices, tastes, and judgments could potentially show us what's good for the species in the long run – and help everyone become more fully human.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Humans are innately driven toward self-actualization. However, only a small percentage of individuals actually achieve it because cultural forces, fear, and the drive to fulfill deficiency needs tend to be so strong. It's possible that by identifying self-actualizing people and observing their choices, humanity could cast aside its neuroses and become truly healthy.