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On the Self-Regulation of Behavior

On the Self-Regulation of Behavior presents a thorough overview of a model of human functioning based on the idea that behavior is goal-directed and regulated by feedback control processes. It describes feedback processes and their application to behavior, considers goals and the idea that goals are organized hierarchically, examines affect as deriving from a different kind of feedback process, and analyzes how success expectancies influence whether people keep trying to attain goals or disengage. Later sections consider a series of emerging themes, including dynamic systems as a model for shifting among goals, catastrophe theory as a model for persistence, and the question of whether behavior is controlled or instead “emerges.” Three chapters consider the implications of these various ideas for understanding maladaptive behavior, and the closing chapter asks whether goals are a necessity of life. Throughout, theory is presented in the context of diverse issues that link the theory to other literatures.

Charles S. Carver is a professor of psychology at the University of Miami. Michael F. Scheier is a professor of psychology at Carnegie Mellon University. They have conducted research on personality processes and motivation in a variety of laboratory and applied settings, most recently focusing on the role of personality variables in responding to health crises such as coronary disease and cancer. Their research has been supported by the National Science Foundation; the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; the National Cancer Institute; the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; and the American Cancer Society.

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*For one of the world's great writers of
psychological science fiction: Jeffrey A. Carver*
csc

For Howard F. Matthews, father-in-law extraordinaire
mfs

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
1 Introduction and Plan	1
What Makes Behavior Happen?	1
Some Limitations and Some Grandiosity	2
Observations and Origins	3
The Book's Plan	4
Goal-Directed Action	4
Emotion	5
Confidence and Doubt, Persisting and Giving Up	6
Problems in Behavior	7
Newer Themes: Dynamic Systems and Catastrophes	7
Control versus Emergence of Behavior	8
Goal Engagement and Life	9
2 Principles of Feedback Control	10
Cybernetics, Feedback, and Control	10
Negative Feedback	10
An Example: The Ubiquitous Thermostat	13
Additional Issues in Feedback Control	15
Sloppy versus Tight Control	15
Lag Time	15
Intermittent Feedback	17
Distinctions and Further Constructs	17
Positive Feedback Loops	18
Open Loop Systems	19
Feedforward	20
Interrelations among Feedback Processes	22
Interdependency	23

viii Contents

Reference Value and Input Function: How Do They Differ?	24
Hierarchies	26
Concluding Comment	28
3 Discrepancy-Reducing Feedback Processes in Behavior	29
Feedback Control in Human Behavior	29
Early Applications of Feedback Principles	30
Our Starting Points	30
Self-Directed Attention and Comparison with Standards	31
Self-Directed Attention and Conformity to Standards	34
Brain Functioning, Self-Awareness, and Self-Regulation	37
How Does Attention Shift to the Self in Ordinary Life?	38
Broadening the Application of Feedback Principles	40
Sources and Nature of Feedback of the Effects of One's Behavior	40
Use of Feedback for Self-Verification	42
Social Comparison and Feedback Control	44
Summary	47
4 Discrepancy-Enlarging Loops, and Three Further Issues	48
Discrepancy-Enlarging Feedback Loops in Behavior	48
Downward Social Comparison	49
Negative Reference Groups	49
Feared Self and Unwanted Self	50
Positive Feedback Process Constrained by Negative Feedback Process	51
The Ought Self	54
Reactance	55
Further Issues	57
Feedback Loops in Mutual Interdependence	57
The Search for Discrepancies	59
The Issue of Will	60
5 Goals and Behavior	63
Goals	63
An Overview of Broad Goal Constructs	63
Task-Specific Goals	65
Hierarchical Conceptions of Goals	67
Basic Premise: Goals Can Be Differentiated by Levels of Abstraction	67
A Control Hierarchy	68

Contents	ix
Hierarchical Functioning Is Simultaneous	73
Action Identification	74
Comparisons Outside Personality–Social Psychology	76
Hierarchical Plans	76
Hierarchical Models of Motor Control	77
Comparisons from Personality–Social Psychology	78
Relations to Goal Models Outlined Earlier	78
Hierarchicality behind Task Efforts	79
Hierarchicality in Other Models	81
Summary	82
6 Goals, Hierarchicality, and Behavior: Further Issues	83
Challenges to Hierarchicality	83
Hierarchies, Heterarchies, and Coalitions	83
Are the Qualities of the Proposed Hierarchy the Wrong Sorts?	85
Responsibility for Details	86
Further Issues Regarding Hierarchical Functioning	87
Which Level Is Functionally Superordinate Can Vary	87
Multiple Paths to High-Level Goals, Multiple Meanings in Concrete Action	89
Goal Importance	90
Approach Goals and Avoidance Goals within a Hierarchy	91
Approach and Avoidance Goals and Well-Being	92
Multiple Simultaneous Goals	93
Conflict and Scheduling	93
Multiple Goals Satisfied in One Activity	94
Programs Seem Different from Other Goals	95
Analog versus Digital Functioning	95
Opportunistic Planning and Stages in Decision Making	96
Goal Hierarchies and Traits	97
Traits and Goals	97
Viewing Others in Terms of Traits versus Actions	98
Traits and Behaviors in Memory	99
Goals and the Self	100
Self-Determination Theory and the Self	101
7 Public and Private Aspects of the Self	103
Aspects of Self	103
Further Distinctions	105
Recent Statements	107

x	Contents	
	Aspects of Self and Classes of Goal	108
	Behavioral Self-Regulation and Private versus Social Goals	110
	Formation of Intentions	110
	Differential Valuation of Personal and Social Goals	112
	Self-Consciousness and Self-Awareness in Self-Regulation	113
	Anticipating Interaction	113
	Conformity	115
	Attitudes, Subjective Norms, and Behavior	116
	Private Preferences and Subjective Norms Vary in Their Content	118
8	Control Processes and Affect	120
	Goals, Rate of Progress, and Affect	121
	Discrepancy Reduction and Rate of Reduction	121
	Progress Toward a Goal versus Completion of Subgoals	124
	Evidence on the Affective Consequences of Progress	125
	Hsee and Abelson	125
	Lawrence, Carver, and Scheier	126
	Brunstein	128
	Affleck and Colleagues	129
	Questions	130
	Is This Really a Feedback System?	130
	Does Positive Affect Lead to Coasting?	131
	A Cruise-Control Model of Affect	133
	Changes in Rate: Acceleration and Deceleration	133
	Subjective Experience of Acceleration and Deceleration	134
	Surprise	135
	Research	136
	Affect from Discrepancy-Enlarging Loops	137
	Doing Well, Doing Poorly	138
	Activation Asymmetry between Dimensions	139
	Affect and Behavior	140
	Affect in the Absence of Action	140
	Affect from Recollection or Imagination	141
	Potential for Affect and Levels of Abstraction	141
	Merging Affect and Action	142
	Two Systems in Concert: Other Applications	144
	Breadth of Application	146
9	Affect: Issues and Comparisons	148
	Meta-Level Standards	148
	Meta-Level Standards Vary in Stringency	148

Contents	xi
Influences on Stringency	149
Changing Meta-Level Standards	150
Further Issues	153
Stress as the Disruption of Goal-Directed Activity	153
Goal Attainment and Negative Affect	154
Conflict and Mixed Feelings	155
Time Windows for Input to Meta-Monitoring	
Can Vary	156
Are There Other Mechanisms That Produce Affect?	158
Relationships to Other Theories	159
Affect and Reprioritization	159
Self-Discrepancy Theory	161
Positive and Negative Affect	164
Biological Models of Bases of Affect	166
10 Expectancies and Disengagement	171
Affect Is Linked to Expectancy	171
Feelings and Confidence	172
Mood and Decision Making	173
Confidence and Brain Function	174
Interruption and Further Assessment	175
Interruption	175
Assessment of Expectancies	176
Generality and Specificity of Expectancies	178
Effort versus Disengagement	180
Theory	180
Research: Comparisons with Standards	182
Research: Responses to Fear	183
Research: Persistence	184
Mental Disengagement, Impaired Task Performance, and Negative Rumination	185
Self-Focus, Task Focus, and Rumination	186
Effort and Disengagement: The Great Divide	188
Is Disengagement Good or Bad?	189
11 Disengagement: Issues and Comparisons	190
Scaling Back Goals as Limited Disengagement	190
Problems with Limited Disengagement	191
Scaling Back Goals as Changing Velocity	
Reference Value	192
When Giving Up Is Not a Tenable Option	193
Hierarchicality and Importance Can Impede Disengagement	193

xii Contents

Inability to Disengage and Responses to Health	
Threats	195
Helplessness	196
Watersheds, Disjunctions, and Bifurcations among	
Responses	197
Other Disjunctive Motivational Models	198
Does Disengagement Imply an Override Mechanism?	200
Disengagement, or Competing Motives?	201
Loss of Commitment	203
Further Theoretical Comparisons	204
Efficacy Expectancy and Expectancy of Success	204
The Sense of Personal Control	205
Engagement and Disengagement in Other Literatures	208
Goal Setting	209
Social Facilitation	209
Upward and Downward Social Comparison	210
Self-Verification	211
Performance Goals and Learning Goals	212
Curiosity	213
Stress and Coping	214
Summary	215
12 Applications to Problems in Living	217
Regulating with the Wrong Feedback	217
Automatic Distortion of Feedback	218
Goals Operating out of Awareness	219
Doubt as a Root of Problems	220
Automatic Use of Previously Encoded Success	
Expectancies	221
Premature Disengagement of Effort	222
Test Anxiety	222
Social Anxiety	224
Failure to Disengage Completely When Doing So Is the	
Right Response	226
“Hanging On” Is Related to Distress	227
When <i>Is</i> Disengagement the Right Response?	228
Lives out of Balance	228
Complexity of the Self	230
Rumination	230
Rumination as Problem Solving and Attempted	
Discrepancy Reduction	231
Rumination as Dysfunctional	232

Contents	xiii
13 Hierarchicality and Problems in Living	234
Links between Concrete Goals and the Core Values of the Self	234
Hierarchicality as an Impediment to Disengagement	234
Problems as Conflicts among Goals	236
Problems as Absence of Links from High to Low Levels	237
Reorganization of the Self	237
Making Low Levels Functionally Superordinate	238
Reduction of High-Level Control by Deindividuation and Alcohol	238
Relinquishing or Abandoning High-Level Control as Escape from the Self	241
Relinquishing or Abandoning High-Level Control as Problem Solving	242
Further Comparisons	243
Failure of High-Level Override: Symmetry in Application	246
Residing Too Much at High Levels	247
14 Chaos and Dynamic Systems	250
Dynamic Systems	250
Nonlinearity	251
Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions	254
Phase Space, Attractors, and Repellers	256
Another Way of Picturing Attractors	258
Variability and Phase Changes	260
Simple Applications of Dynamic Systems Thinking	262
Goals as Attractors	263
Shifts among Attractors and Motivational Dynamics	265
Variability in the Construing of Social Behavior	266
Variability and Consciousness	268
Consciousness, Attractors, and Importance in Day-to-Day Life	268
Chaotic Variation as Frequency Distributions	271
Variability of Behavior in Iterative Systems	273
15 Catastrophe Theory	275
The Cusp Catastrophe	275
Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions	276
Hysteresis	278
Catastrophes in Physical Reality	279
Variability	281

xiv Contents

Applications of Catastrophe Theory	282
Perception	282
Dating and Mating	284
Relationship Formation and Dissolution	285
Groups	286
Persuasion and Belief Perseverance	287
Rumination versus Action	288
Expectancies	289
Effort versus Disengagement	290
Importance or Investment as a Critical Control Parameter	294
16 Further Applications to Problems in Living	296
Catastrophes and Psychological Problems	296
A Remedy: Care Less	299
Chaotically Caring	301
Further Possible Manifestations of the Cusp Catastrophe	302
Dynamic Systems and the Change Process	303
Attractors, Minima, Stability, and Optimality	303
Stability, Adaptation, and Optimality	305
Minima in Specific Problems	306
Therapy	307
Destabilization and the Metaphors of Dynamic Systems	309
Extensions	311
Destabilization, Reorganization, and Beneficial Effects of Trauma	311
Psychological Growth	312
17 Is Behavior Controlled or Does It Emerge?	317
Coordination and Complexity Emergent from Simple Sources	317
Some Apparent Complexity Need Not Be Created	318
Properties Emergent from Social Interaction	320
Does Emergence of Some Imply Emergence of All?	321
Two Modes of Functioning?	322
Connectionism	323
Need Everything Be Distributed?	327
Planning and Goal-Relevant Decisions	329
Dual-Process Models	331
Two-Mode Models in Personality–Social Psychology	332

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 0521572045 - On the Self-Regulation of Behavior
 Charles S. Carver and Michael F. Scheier
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents	xv
Cognitive–Experiential Self-Theory	333
Deliberative and Implemental Mindsets	334
Comparisons among Theories	335
Two Automaticities	336
Autonomous Artificial Agents	337
Complexity and Coordination	338
Another View of Goals in Autonomous Agents	339
Comparison with Two-Mode Models of Thinking	343
Conclusions	344
18 Goal Engagement, Life, and Death	346
Conceptualization	347
Goal Engagement and Well-Being	350
Disengagement and Death	350
Doubt, Disengagement, and Self-Destructive Behavior	350
Disengagement and Passive Death	352
Disengagement, Disease, and Death	353
Disengagement and Disease Vulnerability	353
Doubt, Disengagement, and Adverse Responses to Disease	354
Disengagement, Recurrence, Disease Progression, and Death	356
Conclusions	357
Dynamics and Engagement	358
Aging and the Reduction of Importance	361
<i>References</i>	365
<i>Name Index</i>	423
<i>Subject Index</i>	435

Preface

In 1981 we published a book in which we argued that feedback processes are important in the self-regulation of human behavior, that these processes underlie not just the body's internal maintenance activities, but even behavior that's consciously controlled. That book was a research monograph, reporting many experiments in detail. It was hard to read for plot.

Since 1981 we've realized that the line of thought we described there can be extended in several additional ways. This book revisits the themes of 1981 and adds several extrapolations from the earlier model – some our own, some developed by others. We discuss the latter in a way that's maximally compatible with our own ideas, to try to tell a coherent story. In doing this, we've tried not to do serious violence to ideas whose origins lie with people other than ourselves.

This book is in some respects a continuation of the earlier one. It's an easier read, partly because it's thinner on data. What dominates the stage in this book are ideas and speculations. This is very much a point-of-view book, and speculation plays a larger role here than in the earlier one. We've stretched to make connections across literatures, even where the links are tenuous. We hope these connections will cause you to consider some possibilities you might not otherwise have thought about.

To Whom This Book Is Written

We wrote this book to overview a set of ideas that we find interesting and useful about how behavior occurs in the behaving person. In the main, it's intended for graduate students and professionals in personality–social psychology (and related areas such as clinical, counseling, health, developmental, and organizational psychology). This doesn't mean it won't be of interest to others, or that it's too technical for nonpsychologists to follow. We've actually assumed very little technical knowledge on the reader's part.

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Charles S. Carver and Michael F. Scheier
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xviii Preface

Because we want to present as coherent a picture as we can, we've included some things we've said before. Early sections are partly (not entirely) redundant with our earlier book. Some points made in later sections have been aired in articles published in the past few years. But there are also a good many extrapolations and speculations, particularly in later sections, that we *haven't* entertained elsewhere.

We've tried to present here the bones of a cybernetic view on human self-regulation, somewhat unencumbered by the details of the literature that tends to support the viewpoint. On the other hand, we've tried to bring into the discussion a range of issues and questions that have been raised in our own minds (and in the minds of people who disagree with us about the usefulness of these ideas) during the years in which we've worked on these topics. Not all the issues are resolved, which leaves a residual tension in some parts of the discussion that we hope will prompt further work. In any case, we hope that the picture sketched across these pages will be of interest to others who are interested, as we are, in the structure of the self-regulation of behavior.

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From Coral Gables:

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I'd also like to express my personal thanks to the following:

- Linda Cahan, my secretary, who dealt with a torrent of faxes during my year away, and the usual chaos since my return.
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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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- My co-author, Michael Scheier, who exhibited a salutary tendency to keep me at least somewhat tethered to reality when I tended to drift.
- Last but not least, Calvin, my shag terrier, who's made the past two years of my life much more interesting than they would otherwise have been.

From Pittsburgh:

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