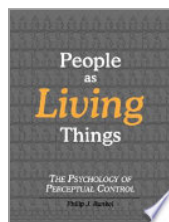




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## People as Living Things: The Psychology of Perceptual Control

By Philip Julian Runkel

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I turn now to a more formal and detailed description of The Test for the Controlled Quantity. The procedure is contained in the following nine steps. I have rephrased them from Powers's 1973 book, pages 232–246, and his 1979a (vol. 4 no. 8, September) article, pages 110, 112.

- 1 Select a variable that you think the person might be maintaining at some level. In other words, guess at an input variable. Examples: light intensity, sensation of skin temperature, admiration in another person's voice. (Powers often speaks of the input *quantity*, because one usually looks for an amount or degree of some variable—such as temperature—the perception of which is controlled.)
- 2 Predict what would happen if the person is *not* maintaining the variable at a preferred level.
- 3 Apply various amounts and directions of disturbance directly to the variable.
- 4 Measure the actual effects of the disturbances.
- 5 If the effects are what you predicted under the assumption that the person is *not* acting to control the variable, stop here. The person is indeed not acting to control it; you guessed wrong about the variable.
- 6 On the other hand, if the effect is markedly smaller than the predicted effect, look for what the person might be doing to oppose the disturbance. Look for a cause of the opposition to the disturbance which, by its own varying, can counterbalance variations in the input quantity (such as pulling as necessary on the handle of your umbrella to keep the wind from carrying it off). That cause may be caused by the person's output. You may have found the feedback function.
- 7 Look for the way by which the person can sense the variable. If you can find no way by which the person can sense the variable (the input quantity), stop. People cannot control what they cannot sense.
- 8 If you find a means of sensing, block it so that the person cannot now sense the variable. If the disturbance continues to be opposed, you have not found the right sensor. If you cannot find a sensor, stop. Make another guess at an input quantity.
- 9 If all the preceding steps are passed, you have found the input quantity, the variable the person is controlling.

When you find the controlled variable, you can then usually make a very good guess about the nature of the internal standard controlling it. But describing the internal standard in precise words is not of first importance. The important thing, both for further experimentation and in practical affairs, is to have found how to disturb the controlled variable and how to avoid doing so.

Sometimes, both in research and in everyday life, you can ask people to adopt temporarily an internal standard that you describe to them. If they have themselves freely chosen to comply with your request and if you can describe the internal standard clearly and objectively (as in the examples of research I have given so far), you are off and running. At other times, you may not be able to persuade the person to adopt the internal standard you have in mind. Even if the person is willing, the person may not understand your request sufficiently well. In that case, you must start from scratch and use all the steps of The Test to discover what variable the person is indeed controlling.

### Guessing Wrong

To use The Test, you must make a guess about an internal standard and then change something in the environment that the person senses. If you succeed in changing the thing—that is, if the person does *not* act to maintain it the way it was—then you have guessed wrong. If the person *does* act against the change you try to make, then you have guessed right, or at least you are on the right track. You know something about the person you did not know before. But you may have guessed wrong about the *aspect* of the change, the input quantity, that you think the person is wanting to maintain. You will discover that fact if later steps in The Test go wrong. Then you have to guess again. You will, however, be ahead of the game, because you know that the input has something to do with the change you tried to make in the environment.

It is easy for an onlooker, watching someone ward off a threat to a controlled variable, to make a wrong guess about the variable the person is trying to maintain. Cries of “No! No!” or “I won't do it!” or “You think you're pretty clever, don't you?” or a stony silence—those are all good indicators that some variable is being disturbed, but poor indicators of what the variable might be like. For example, what perception