

# *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Revisited*

DOUGLAS FRAME  
*Exeter, Ontario*

**ABSTRACT:** The paper reviews Maslow's hierarchy of prepotent needs and his characterization of the self-actualizing personality. It suggests that since so few among the general population meet Maslow's own criteria for self-actualization, an educational system designed to produce such personalities must fail of its object in an overwhelming percentage of cases. The goal being unreachable, teachers tend to lower their sights and attend only to the lower stages of the hierarchy (security, self-esteem), and thus dilute the cognitive content of learning. Moreover, Maslow's hierarchy is not dialectical, in the sense that the completion of each stage does not necessarily lead to the next level. The self-actualizing personality appears as a mysterious leap from one stage to another, and cannot be engineered from without. As an alternative, the paper suggests a more logical sequence of needs based on the development of rationality.

**KEYWORDS:** Maslow, hierarchy, needs, self-esteem, self-actualization, teleology, motivation, psychotherapy, uniqueness, rationality.

Since its original publication in 1943, in a paper entitled "A Theory of Human Motivation," A. H. Maslow's doctrine of the hierarchy of prepotent needs has had a very considerable impact on educational theory and practice in North America. This in spite of the fact that his theory embodies two traditional logical concepts that have not found much favour with North American theorists of education – hierarchy and *teleology*. Contemporary education is even more fiercely egalitarian now than it was then, and to distinguish, as Maslow does, between *higher* and *lower* human needs (and therefore between superior and inferior human beings) is to risk condemnation as elitist. Teleology as a concept has been rehabilitated to some degree of late by recent advances in nuclear physics and genetics, but its use in educational theory even now goes against the grain of a system that is still predominantly positivist, and tends to formulate its psychology in mechanistic terms.

Perhaps one reason why the theory has proved attractive in educational circles is that it seems to provide a structure around which educational practice can mould itself, a developmental sequence which seems to follow a rational pattern in depicting the maturation of the child. It envisions a sequence of *prepotent needs*, each of which

must be satisfied before the next higher need emerges in the subject's consciousness. These needs are, respectively, a) the physiological needs of food, clothing, and shelter, b) the need for security of life and person, c) the need for a loving relation with others, d) self-esteem, and finally, e) self-actualization. Each of these is prepotent; only when it has been to some degree satisfied is it possible for the subject to become actuated by the next higher need. This provides the basis for contemporary education's preoccupation with enhancing the child's self-esteem, for the theory seems to mean that only when this has been established can he or she be expected to graduate to cognitive learning. Generalization from this has contributed to the conception of the teacher's task as primarily the *removal of obstacles* to learning, as opposed to the authoritarian imposition of knowledge to be learned and memorized. Logically, if the culmination of education is *self-actualization*, then the teacher becomes a facilitator rather than an instructor. This accounts for the popularity of techniques such as peer-group projects, independent study, the keeping of personal journals, and so on, together with an aversion to authoritarian techniques such as lectures and examinations.

Such procedures have a further inherent appeal to educators in that they promote democratic values. Too often, proponents argue, the image of the traditional schoolmaster is an impediment to learning, since it suggests an egocentric "prima donna" whose aim is not to teach but to dominate and control his charges. Teachers are urged to eschew the role of the "sage on the stage" and assume instead the comportment of the "guide on the side." This concern with the observance of democratic values has been further developed by teachers who invite their students to play a role in actually designing the curriculum and deciding for themselves what the topics for class discussion shall be.

Maslow's theory is teleological, as has been said. It takes the final product of education, the *self-actualizing personality* (henceforward the S.A.P.) to be definitive of the process as a whole. The lower needs are to be satisfied as the means to that end. Maslow defined self-actualization as "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything one is capable of becoming" (Maslow, 1943/1973, p. 163). This phrase, or its equivalent, has become a commonplace in education theory and appears innumerable times every year in inspirational addresses to teachers and students, and in the oratory of valedictorians.

It is only to be expected that Maslow's hierarchy, as interpreted and implemented by teachers on a large scale over a wide geographical area, should differ in minute but important ways from the hierarchy as he originally conceived it. Its incorporation into large administrative structures would have the same effect extreme enlargement of a photograph has on the original. Flaws hardly noticeable in the original would become strikingly apparent in the blow-up. The intent of this paper is to reexamine Maslow's doctrine, from a philosophical rather than a psychological perspective, and to consider aspects of the theory that are vulnerable to misunderstanding and distortion when translated into action on a large scale.

In the first place, it is apparent that the term self-actualization, which as we have seen is taken as the essential factor qualifying every stage in the hierarchy, can have as many meanings as there are selves. Though attractive to many teachers as a principle of freedom, reflecting democratic values, it is too vague in and by itself to function as the defining factor in every phase of an educational structure. Maslow himself probably realized this, for in 1950 he published a study of a group of subjects whom he considered to be S.A.P.'s. Though necessarily informal and not clinical, and begun as a private and personal inquiry, the study produced such startling results that he decided to publish them in spite of the "technically questionable" (p. 178) nature of the research. His conclusions as to the general character of S.A.P.'s are indeed startling, especially for those who take such persons as ideal products of the educational process.

It is immediately apparent that the S.A.P. as defined by Maslow constitutes only a minuscule proportion of the general population. To find contemporary subjects, he screened 3000 college students (already an elite group) and found only one usable subject (Maslow, 1950/1973, p. 178). He had hoped to use characters from fiction and drama, "but none were found that were usable in our culture and time (in itself a thought-provoking finding)" (p. 178). He therefore decided to include noncontemporary, historical persons in the subject group. These included Einstein, Lincoln, William James, Spinoza, Whitman, Beethoven, Freud, and Goethe, and not even all of these were classified as "highly probable" (p. 180) instances of the S.A.P. Apparently his criteria of selection were of such a standard as to exclude all but a tiny fraction of one per cent of the general population. In this perspective, a general education whose aim is to produce the S.A.P. must fail in an overwhelming percentage of cases.

One can also raise questions about the logical relation between the different stages in the hierarchy. Gratification of the lower needs is a necessary condition for, but not in itself the cause of, the emergence of the S.A.P. Most children in North American schools are adequately nourished and relatively safe; but a smaller proportion are accepted, loved and loving, and still fewer have attained a state of robust confidence and self-esteem. But even they do not all become self-actualisers; it is possible, obviously, to stall in one's progress through the hierarchy, and no amount of fillips to one's self-esteem can produce an Einstein or a Spinoza. And where the quality of self-actualization is lacking, self-esteem may be indistinguishable from complacency.

In spite of Maslow's study, the ultimate phase of the process, in which the S.A.P. emerges from the prior stage of simple self-esteem, remains mysterious. "Since in our society basically satisfied people are the exception, we do not know much about self-actualization, either experimentally or clinically" (Maslow, 1943/1973, p. 163). There appears to be no known means of actively bringing self-actualization about. The only techniques available are negative ones, in the sense that all one can do is return to the prior stage in the hierarchy and make sure that need has been fulfilled. This has the

result that educational methodology becomes increasingly concerned with the lower needs of the child; administrators and even teachers are less and less concerned with the intellectual and cognitive aspects of education, and more and more preoccupied with school safety, lunch programmes, and so on. Though Maslow's concept of self-actualization is absolutely incompatible with behaviourism (since it envisions the realization of a self which behaviourists do not recognize), the absence of any positive method of fostering the S.A.P. has led to an uneasy alliance, in practice, between Maslovians and behaviourists. The Maslovian teacher and the behaviourist are both in the position of having to stand aside, so to speak, and perform the functions of cheerleader while their subject struggles to achieve the educational objective by his or her own efforts. One cannot teach a child to become self-actualizing, any more than one can teach a rat in a maze to find the way out. In both cases, the subject is attempting a task that the teacher cannot demonstrate.

Reduced emphasis on the teacher's leadership role, however, has the unfortunate side effect of removing from before the student a visible example of an actualized self. However negatively magisterial the image of the schoolmaster, it is nevertheless a vividly real demonstration of an intensely individual and intellectually vital *personality*, an example of what education in the old style actually produced. Crocker-Harris, the tragic schoolmaster hero of Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version: A Play in One Act* (1949) intimidating and acerbic in the classroom though he was, nevertheless furnished his students with concrete experience of a mature mind bringing intelligence and learning to bear on the task before it.

The tendency of educators to "back off" from cognitive objectives and turn their attention to the lower needs in the hierarchy is reinforced by the popular culture of consumerism. The constant reiteration of the ideal of "the good life" on a purely materialistic level by news and entertainment media tends to portray the fulfilment of the lower needs in the hierarchy as an end in itself. Oddly, educational "pep talks" which extol the virtues of self-actualization will go on in the next breath to point out the economic advantages of a good education, and thus effectively short-circuit the hierarchy of needs around which the educational system is organized. For self-actualization is the exact opposite of the economic principle of utility, which demands heteronomy, an "other-directedness" in employees. "The motivation of ordinary men is a striving for the basic need gratifications which they lack. But self-actualizing people lack none of these gratifications" (Maslow, 1950/1973, p. 168). This sounds as if only independently wealthy persons could become S.A.P.'s, but in fact it is not the gratification that S.A.P.'s lack; it is the *need* for such gratification. An educational system which strove whole-heartedly for the attainment of self-actualization for everyone would be profoundly at odds with contemporary North American society, based as it is on the indulgence of purely physical needs – food, clothing, houses, automobiles, appliances, and sex. These are the gratifications relentlessly promoted by an overwhelming and manipulative marketing system. By Maslow's own showing,

however, the S.A.P.'s motivation is untouched by such appeals, and this marks him out as an alien and a loner.

If we remove from the concept of self-actualization its cognitive element, the self that is to be realized becomes increasingly vague and indeterminate. It is by definition an absolute and unique individual and therefore unlike any other self. Moreover, what is to be realized is unrecognizable in advance of its appearance; not even the self-actualizing person knows ahead of time what it is that he aims to become. In a culture dominated by the assumptions of science and technology, the problem of defining the term self is ultimately insoluble. It is not even a "something, I know not what" but a ghostly entity hovering somewhere in the interstices of a machine. The self that is actualized turns out to be whatever in fact emerges from a condition of absolute freedom to behave and think as one pleases. As a result, the concept of human potential loses its meaning because there seems to be nothing human beings are not capable of becoming.

This problem becomes acute even at the penultimate stage of encouraging the subject to acquire *self-esteem*, since the matter of inducing someone with low self-esteem to look more favourably on himself is peculiarly intractable. Even to point out to such a person that he lacks self-esteem is likely to aggravate his condition, since it is inevitably taken as a criticism. When a person's negative self-image is associated with membership in an underprivileged race, class, or gender, such attempts often take the form of "raising the consciousness" of the group in question. Besides encouraging factionalism, this defines the self of the person in question as a function of the group and so explicitly denies the basic concept of individuality that makes Maslow's theory so attractive.

Maslow himself attempted to address the problem of the indefiniteness of the term *self-actualizing* in the second study mentioned above. In this later study, he lists 14 traits common to all subjects considered, including:

- Greater realism and acceptance of the real,
- Spontaneity,
- Being *problem-centered* rather than ego-centered,
- Detachment, need for privacy,
- Autonomy, independence of culture and environment,
- Continued freshness of appreciation,
- Mysticism,
- *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, or sympathetic identification with mankind as a whole,
- Democratic behaviour,
- A preoccupation with ends rather than means,
- Philosophical sense of humour,
- Creativeness.

He concludes his study with the following observation:

The topmost portion of the value system of the S.A.P. is entirely unique and idiosyncratic-character-structure expressive. This must be so by definition, for self-actualization is actualization of a self, and no two selves are altogether alike .... [The subjects] are simultaneously very much alike and very much unlike each other. They are more completely 'individual' than any group that has ever been described and yet also more completely socialized, more identified with humanity. (Maslow, 1950/1973, p. 200)

For Maslow, obviously, the self of self-actualization is not the atomic, interchangeable, self-regarding individual that figures so prominently in liberal, social, and economic theory. It requires us to imagine a personality which is an almost indescribable merging of uniqueness and universality, a totally independent and "unclubbable" individual who yet identifies with mankind as a whole. A social or psychological theory that utilizes only the concepts of social science must be totally incapable of dealing with such an entity.

The hierarchy of needs was originally presented as a theory of human motivation, but the later study of the S.A.P. indicates that there is something like a quantum leap between the second-last stage in the process (the attainment of self-esteem) and the final phase of self-actualization, such that the term *motivation* in the latter case acquires a meaning quite different from the one it bears in earlier stages. The lower needs of the hierarchy remain in the realm of nature, since they are obviously operative even at the level of animal existence. They are, as it were, negative motives concerned with negative freedom, freedom *from*, whereas what the S.A.P. is concerned about is positive freedom, freedom *to*. At the lower levels of need such negative freedom usually involves restrictions of some kind; being adequately nourished and safe entails the acceptance of certain restraints. But the consistent tendency of S.A.P.'s is to ignore restraints. In Maslow's words, they are "uniformly unthreatened and unfrightened by the unknown .... They do not cling to the familiar (nor is their quest for truth a catastrophic need for certainty, safety, definiteness, and order)" (1950/1973, p. 182). In this sense the motivation of S.A.P.'s is just the opposite of the motivation of average personalities.

When the S.A.P. is postulated as the entelechy or final cause of the educational process, the tendency will be to try to provide to all students in some degree the conditions of free expression necessary to self-actualization. The danger here is that average personalities will be given an absolute freedom to develop before they themselves feel the need for, or the capacity to deal with, it. Nor can it be easy for teachers to make the transition from a teaching environment that nurtures the child and provides both physical and psychological security to one that abandons the need for "certainty, safety, definiteness and order" (Maslow, 1950/1973, p. 182) with a view to encouraging the development of the S.A.P. As Maslow himself says, "doubt, tentativeness, uncertainty, with the consequent necessity for abeyance of decision" (p.

182) are a "pleasantly stimulating challenge" for S.A.P.'s, but for most others a "torture" (p. 182).

An educational system structured on the lines of the Maslovian hierarchy of needs, with the S.A.P. as its crowning achievement, must therefore be a profoundly non-democratic and elitist institution. It will tend to ignore what Aristotle called proportion (*to analogon*), or the distribution of goods determined by the ability of the recipients to appreciate and use them. Even if it reaches its ultimate stage, under the guise of equality for all it will provide an education that by far the great majority of average people cannot use. In actual practice, however, the attempt to turn all its subjects into S.A.P.'s is tacitly abandoned, and education for everyone (including S.A.P.'s) lapses into a form of psychotherapy, where by far the greater effort is expended trying to produce complacent, well-adjusted individuals whose natural needs have been met, and whose spiritual needs, in consequence, are ignored.

The central problem, however, is the logical incoherence of the hierarchy itself, for it is not a real dynamic in the sense that fulfilment at each stage brings about a transition to a higher level. There are at least two transitions which are quantum (and qualum) leaps, where what is supposed to supervene is not a continuation of what has preceded but a *metabasis eis allo genos*, the emergence of a state totally different in kind from its predecessor. These are the emergence of self-esteem from the prior state of emotional security, and the emergence of the S.A.P. from the state of self-esteem. Indeed, on closer inspection, it would appear that every stage in the progression is qualitatively different from the one before. Safety does not necessarily follow from having a full belly, nor is being loved the necessary consequence of being safe. The final transition, from self-esteem to self-actualization, is further complicated by the fact that it is a transition from a mode of feeling to a mode of cognition. Maslow considers the desire to "know and understand," to find "meaning," (1943/1973, pp. 164-165) to be a basic characteristic of the S.A.P. He himself warns against "the too easy tendency to separate these desires from the basic needs," (Maslow, 1950/1973, p. 200) but in educational practice too often cognitive endeavour is seen not merely as qualitatively distinct from the feeling of self-confidence, but as formidably destructive of it.

There is a further and even more intractable difficulty. Maslow's characterization of the S.A.P. requires a logical category in which the most extreme individuality coexists with the widest universality. The S.A.P. is independent of social convention, and his or her value-system is "entirely unique and idiosyncratic," (Maslow, 1950/1973, p. 200) and yet he or she is at the same time "more completely socialized, more identified with humanity" (p. 200) than the average citizen. All his subjects, he says, were "simultaneously very much alike and very much unlike each other" (p. 191). They were all uniformly scornful of conventional morality and yet each evinced "for human beings in general a deep feeling of identification, sympathy, and affection .... It is as if they are all members of a single family" (p. 191). At least some of the aura of mystery surrounding the emergence of such personalities derives from the fact

that contemporary sociology, with its positivistic preconceptions, makes an absolute distinction between individual and universal, so that the notion of a universal uniqueness must be a contradiction in terms.

Yet another source of potential misunderstanding is the difference between the *freedom* that is the goal of the S.A.P. as Maslow defines it and the concept of freedom currently accepted by liberal political theory. It is, for one thing, freedom from the obsessions of consumerism. For another, it is not a freedom to "do as one likes." Maslow's self-actualizing personalities "customarily have some mission in life, some task to fulfil, some problem outside of themselves which enlists much of their energies." But, he adds, "this is not necessarily a task that they would prefer or choose for themselves; it may be a task that they feel is their responsibility, duty, or obligation" (1950/1973, pp. 186-187). The very phrasing of this statement points to a confusion in the notion of free choice; it is not a task that they would "choose for themselves," and yet they have obviously *have* chosen it, and precisely *for themselves*. What he has in mind is that species of moral choice in which freedom is not distinct from necessity, where freedom is not an escape from discipline but an internalizing of it. The S.A.P. chooses his aim in life not because he wants to but because he must, and yet it is part of the process of self-actualization to *want* to do what one *has* to do. This is the Kantian conception of rational freedom, which consists in freely choosing to do one's duty because it is one's duty. It has obvious implications for the practice of granting students greater freedom in the classroom. Where the subject has no overriding, self-imposed task to carry out, independence is more likely to be a burden than a challenge.

It would appear that Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs draws upon an earlier philosophical tradition, one that has been labelled expressivism, and originated with the German philosopher J.G. Herder in the decade of the 1770s. Charles Taylor aptly characterizes this philosophy as follows:

[Self-actualization] is not only the fulfilment of life but also the clarification of meaning. In the course of living adequately I not only fulfil my humanity but clarify what my humanity is about. As such a clarification my life-form is not just the fulfilment of purpose but the embodiment of meaning, the expression of an idea .... Human life is both fact and meaningful expression; and its being expression does not reside in a subjective relation of reference to something else, it expresses the idea which it realizes. (1975 p. 11)

Maslow makes no reference to Herder or the German philosophers who deepened and enriched his ideas, but his study of S.A.P.'s is entirely congruent with that earlier tradition. The difficulties arise when we attempt to recast the older notion of self-realization in the context and terminology of contemporary liberal political theory. This imports what looks like a logical incoherence into the theory itself, and ensures that its interpretation by educators will be further distorted and misapplied.

Thus distorted, Maslow's theory of motivation becomes not a continuum but a discontinuity. The gratification of each lower need is a necessary but not a sufficient



condition for the emergence of the next higher one. This seems to locate the actual cause in each case outside the sequence itself. In philosophical terms, his hierarchy, in order to work, must be conceived as dialectical – that is, as a sequence of developmental stages in which the completion of each stage *necessitates* the one that follows. This in turn requires that the development itself be conceived as a sequence, not of differing contents, but of the same content assuming different but related forms. The end product thus would have somehow to be present implicitly in the beginning, as an entelechy or final cause. (This, after all, is already implied in the verb “to actualize,” which means to turn a potency into an act.) But this (essentially Aristotelian) concept of growth also requires us to think of the final product of growth as a universal brought into being in individual form, or better, a universal bringing *itself* into being. This is a concept sharply at odds with the scientific notion of a universal as merely an inductive generality standing for a set of common characteristics. This way of thinking, which sees universal and individual not as abstract opposites but as a concrete unity, must also be employed if we are to conceive freedom in its concrete form as inclusive of necessity. Finally, all these notions together add up to a description of *what it is* that thus actualizes itself – in other words, a definition of what it is to be a self.

And, in fact, it is possible to see Maslow's hierarchy in this light as a true dialectical development of what is essentially human, or, to use the terms from the older philosophical tradition, the emergence of self-consciousness, the growth of reason. At the level of extreme physiological need, one can hardly be said to have a self-consciousness at all; one's whole being is absorbed in a pure, physical misery. But once this misery has been temporarily assuaged, a normally intelligent person begins to observe the world around him with a view to making sure that such misery will not be repeated. Hunger in this more generalized sense is not so much the desire for food as the desire to be set free of existence at the merely physical level. It is already, in other words, the actualization of a self that is something beyond one's simple animal nature. So it is with the need for security, for fear has the same effect as extreme hunger; it reduces one to the level of an animal. The desire for security is not merely an avoidance reaction; it is a positive attempt to preserve the human self that has emerged with the satisfaction of physiological need. The experience of love, both familial and sexual, is a further enlargement of the self, and already a form of *knowledge*, since it entails insight into one's own psychological need not to be a self alone, as also a knowing of oneself through knowledge of the other.

The acquisition of self-esteem is even more obviously a function of knowledge, since it entails comparison with others and therefore a growing awareness of the community of minds that is the essential human environment. As Maslow has said, psychological health requires an accurate assessment of others and one's relation to them; the neurotic “is not only emotionally sick – he is cognitively wrong!” (Maslow, 1950/1973, p. 181). The belief that one must acquire self-esteem before one can learn efficiently is rather like the wise resolution of Scholasticus not to enter the water

before he had learned to swim. Learning is not the enemy of self-esteem; it is rather what makes self-esteem possible. Self-actualization seen in this context is not the supervention of some totally new state of affairs but the logical completion of a development of consciousness that has been implied from the beginning. It is plainly a deepening and extension of the experience of love, translated out of immediate feeling into intellectual and cognitive *knowing*. The self that is thus actualized is not only existentially real in the fullest possible sense; it is a self that recognizes its profound identity with every other self. It is what the German philosopher Hegel described as “an I that is a We, and a We that is an I” (1977, p. 110). The potential that is realized in all these forms is what older philosophers called reason, and it is obvious that each is at the same time a development of freedom – a freedom that is not simply given but rather created by the subject himself out of the manifold restraints and limitations of existence at the merely animal level. Seen in this perspective, the Maslovian hierarchy of needs can be recognized as having genuine dialectical power, since it is the progressive realization of a single, all-encompassing motive – the need to be rational.

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*Author's address:*

#5, 397 Marlborough Street  
Exeter, Ontario, Canada NOM 1S2