

Functional Autonomy

Functional autonomy was the theory of motivation that Allport (1937b) put forward as an alternative to the more pervasive dynamic psychologies (theories of motivation) that tended to seek the source of mature, human motivation in innate biology. What was needed, he believed, was an account of the range of human motives that came to be through the processes of development and experience, in separation from the primitive, rudimentary elementary needs of infancy. This was the challenge as Allport conceived of it: "We do need, I admit, a psychology of learning that will explain how transformations comes about from the pre-social or vegetative drives to social, aesthetic and spiritual desires" (Allport, 1940, p. 543). James had earlier proposed that instincts are transitory in nature; they occur once and disappear, transformed into habits with learning and experience. No instinct could keep its motivating force unimpaired once it is absorbed and reformed under learning's influence. Rather than tracing current motives to innate organic tensions (drives, needs, instincts) motivation has to be seen as contemporary. Present energies are not explained by their connection with the earlier forms (from the past). New functions can emerge from preceding functions and do not require the earlier formations to continue to function. Instrumental activities directed to satisfying some original end or goal may become independent interests. A boy scout, for example, may pursue a merit badge in first aid and, having done so, loses that as a goal; but that may lead to the emergence of an interest in a career in medicine. The contemporary, self-sustaining motivations, such as engagement in the medical profession, may have grown out of the earlier system (say need for sustenance or comfort), and may be traceable there historically, but those connections are severed with maturity. The bond is not functional but historical, serviceable to current ends not the past. There is considerable variation in what motivates the adult, beyond mere biological necessities, and attempts to account for motivation that do not recognize that will be inadequate.

A characteristic of the mature personality is the possession of sophisticated, stable interests, and predictable styles of conduct, infinitely varied, current, and self-sustaining. Somehow, in the process of maturation, the manifold potentialities of childhood coalesce into sharper, distinctive motivational systems (Allport, 1937a). As they emerge these systems assume effective driving power and operate as autonomous motives that are as different, in their aims and character, from the motivational systems of the juvenile years as they are from crude organic tensions. It is often found that a skill learned for an external reason, such as learning to read or write in school, becomes an interest which is self-propelling. A love of reading, or a profession in writing, may flow from the original requirements. Allport (1946) reported that many illiterate soldiers during World War II were drafted and were given special literacy training such that they had some proficiency after eight weeks. Their original motivation or incentive was to correspond with family and avoid the shame of signing papers with an "X." Many developed an interest in reading after the original motive had been satisfied and it became a part of their personalities. The original motive was lost entirely; a means became an end in itself. Activities and objects that are means to ends, earlier, can become ends in themselves.

originally a motivational trait (*e.g.*, interest in mechanics) becomes a mere instrument of expression (a skill serviceable in earning a living), or what was originally instrumental (*e.g.*, skill in seamanship) may become a passionate interest. (Allport, 1937a, p. 324)

the skill learned for some external reason, turns into an interest, and is self-propelling, even though the original reason for pursuing it has been lost. . . . What was a means to an end becomes an end in itself. (Allport, 1937a, p. 201)

Motives can come and go. What motivated yesterday may no longer today. Children, in time, may leave behind their childish desires and interests and develop new ones (Allport, 1940).

There is less purposiveness apparent in infancy than in adulthood. Infant behavior is more closely connected with conduct that is impelled by drives. The consciousness of goals, in adults, is much wider, and makes broader use of symbols and of mental operations of a higher order. The types of motivation operative in adults can be categorized as desires, values, interests, attitudes, and will—all terms not applicable to infancy. *Hedonism*, the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, fails in its application to adults. Martyrs die for causes; dive bombers commit suicide; members of underground resistance suffer torture without revealing secrets. Jews in Nazi concentration camps were reported to suffer exhaustion, a lack of vitality, and even death by refusing to eat foods against their religion. Such tensions speak against biological or tissue needs as adequate and sufficient explanations of human motivations or intentions of a mature kind.

The mature life involves the intelligent planning for the future (Allport, 1937a). People in their daily lives act in the present and look ahead to the future. Plans and ambitions mediate the goals projected into the future, but psychologists have busied themselves with historical back-tracking, looking for the present in the past (Allport, 1953). Without goals personality is childish. Of course if one insists that the right solution, and the source of current motivation, is in the historical roots of biologically based motives, childish behavior is what one is left to examine.

The value and advantage of functional autonomy to Allport (1937a) were a few in number. First of all, it paved the way for a dynamic theory of interests, attitudes, traits, sentiments, and so on. It further avoided considering present life as consisting of early archaic forms like instincts. Learning brings about new systems of interests that are contemporary. The determinism of reflexological approaches is challenged because the stimulus has been dethroned. Motives are no longer mechanical reflexes which depend on the capricious operation of conditioned stimuli. Rather than reacting to stimuli, dispositions select stimuli (recall the James example of the four visitors to Europe and how they experienced the same world differently, noticing different things). The stimulus is defined by current interests. The fetish of the *genetic method* is removed from the problem of the origin of conduct. Motives, as Allport emphasized, are always contemporary and have to be studied in their current structure. Only *functional autonomy addresses the obvious fact that new purposes are born of old ones; and these new purposes can be unexpected and unpredictable* (Allport, 1940).

Allport proposed that it is through the course of personal development that intelligence, and an awareness of the world, and its lawfulness, are made, and that freedom, within limits, is the result. A quote from Muller captures the point quite nicely so I shall close this section with it:

There is a long period in people's lives when they are children, a long period behind that when they are embryos, and an ever so much longer period behind that again when evolution was taking place in the germ plasm from which they were derived. In the germinal and embryonic periods, and in part in that of their childhood, the processes that shaped them were not under their own conscious control at all. However, fortunately for them and for us, they were molded in such ways that at last they became possessed of intelligence and cooperative propensities. In that way they became free in the only meaningful sense of the word "free": that of being able to make intelligent knowledgeable choices of courses of action. (Muller in Murray, Skinner, Maslow, Rogers, Frank, Rapoport and Hoffman, 1961, p. 578)

Skinner who partook in the discussion group where Muller made the above comments was an avowed determinist and rejected such freedom. His belief would become dominant. In fact, it had been so for nearly a decade; by the 1950s, notions of conscious choices and of free will were the quaint leftovers from philosophy in psychology (Sappington, 1990).

References

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