

# **A Personal Review of Martin Seligman's book 'Helplessness'**

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I have just read an extremely interesting book: Martin E.P. Seligman, *Helplessness*, W.H. Freeman and Company, New York, 1975. Despite the journalistic-sounding title, this book is a serious scientific study by a reputable experimental psychologist.

... Here's how I would connect his conclusions with my own experience: The things I needed that led me to take to the woods I described as freedom or personal need for purposeful work, satisfaction of "workmanship instinct." These needs can be subsumed under a single need described by Seligman, namely, the need to exercise *control* - provided that we postulate something that Seligman does not demonstrate or explicitly mention, namely, that the exercise of control must require a certain amount of *effort*. (Seligman does seem to *imply* that effort is required for proper satisfaction of the need for control; see pp. 97-98.) Anyone perusing my older notes (say from 1969 to 1975) will see how frustrating to me was my inability to control or influence certain conditions of urban life that affected me, and how much I resented being subjected to any sort of compulsion. (The need to avoid compulsion is one aspect of the need for control: Seligman, p. 55) Purposeful work, of course, is nothing more nor less than the application of effort to control some significant aspect of one's life or environment.

Why was my need to exercise control more powerful than that of the average person? I don't know, but I can conjecture: As an infant I experienced a case of "hospitalisation" that is, I was hospitalized for a week under conditions that drove me into a state of what Seligman calls "helplessness". But later I recovered from this. Having experienced severe helplessness and then recovered from it might plausibly lead to an augmented fear of helplessness and an augmented drive to avoid helplessness; hence; my intolerance of frustration, of dependence, of compulsion; my drive for power; my determined persistence when something important to me is at stake; hence also my tendency to perfectionism, since my perfectionism is an insistence on making a job turn on *the way*. I damn well want it.

... The need to control and to avoid compulsion may also explain the aversion that many people (including me) have for the behavioral engineering schemes of B.F. Skinner and other schemes for manipulating human beings. These schemes are offensive not only because it is hard on our self-esteem to envision ourselves as mere pawns in someone else's game, but also, perhaps, because the idea of being controlled by someone else conflicts with our own need to avoid compulsion and exercise control ...

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