

On Learned Helplessness

Ted Kaczynski

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At the outset of my letter of October 12, 2004 to Dr. Skrbina, I made several statements based on my memory of the 1975 edition of Martin E.P. Seligman's book *Helplessness* (see our List of Works Cited). I subsequently had an opportunity to reread Seligman's book in its 1992 edition, which appears to be identical with the 1975 edition in the pages numbered with Arabic numerals, and I found that my statements about experiments with pigeons and rats were incorrect. See Seligman, pages 35, 169 (but see also pages 58-59). I found that my other statements were adequately justified by what Seligman had actually written. See Seligman, pages 21-25, 31-34, 36, 46-47, 54-60, 65, 74, 88, 92-93, 104-06, 137, 148, 155-57, 192-93 (note 29 to Chapter Three), 198 (note 41 to Chapter Five).

The 1992 edition of Seligman's book contains an introduction that did not appear in the 1975 edition, and on several points I have to disagree with the new introduction. One of these points is worth discussing here.

Seligman makes clear (e.g., on pages 99, 137) that a person acquires resistance to depression through the experience of exercising control. In his 1992 introduction, page xx, Seligman writes: "The development of technology, mass production, and mass distribution has enabled large numbers of people to have a significant measure of choice, and therefore of personal control, over their lives." Thus it might appear that, in line with Seligman's theory, modern people ought to be highly resistant to depression. Yet, as Seligman writes on page xxxiii of his 1992 introduction: "We have experienced a tenfold increase in depression in the last two generations... ." Seligman tries to explain this primarily in terms of something he calls "meaning," or "attachment to something larger than you are" (page xxxiii). This explanation is wildly speculative, and I find it implausible. An easier and more plausible explanation can be derived from two points that are implicit in Seligman's 1975 theory without being explicitly stated there.

First, the utility of the experience of exercising control depends upon the importance to the organism of the events controlled. Control in unimportant matters does little to build the organism's resistance to depression. This is suggested by what Seligman wrote on pages 61-62 of his book. Modern technology tends to give the individual control only in relatively unimportant matters, while the life-and-death issues for the most part are kept under the control of large organizations. See ISAIF, 1111 67, 72, 94, and Part II.A of my October 12, 2004 letter to Dr. Skrbina.

Second, in order to be effective in building resistance to depression, the exercise of control must require a serious effort. See Seligman, pages 158-59. Much of modern technology serves to minimize the effort that we have to make in order to accomplish things, and this drastically reduces the benefit that we get from the experience of exercising control even in life-and-death matters. We no longer have to grow our own food or forage for it, we just buy it in the supermarket; when threatened by physical danger we merely dial 911; to make provision for ourselves in case we get sick, all we have to do is keep up with our insurance payments and the system takes care of the rest.

These are the reasons why the kind of control that the technological system gives us is of little use in building our resistance to depression; and notice that this explanation is practically identical to that provided by the concept of the power process as expounded in ISAIF.

I need to add that in his later work Seligman seems to have become a kind of happiness guru, as shown in such books as *Learned Optimism*, *Authentic Happiness*, and *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and WellBeing*. But we can appreciate Seligman's early work on learned helplessness even if we don't respect his subsequent efforts.

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