

Abraham Maslow and the All-American Self

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The most important American psychologist since William James, and perhaps the most important psychologist altogether since Carl Jung, was Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). Maslow's brainchild was the ideal of the "self-actualizing" person, the supreme human type who becomes everything he is capable of becoming. "Everything?," one may justly ask. That has a Nietzschean ring to it, and leaves a lot of room for moral ugliness and even enormity. Thus self-actualization has drawn heavy fire, principally from conservative intellectuals, as typical Sixties folderol, a bad idea endlessly spreading, infesting the public mind like a colony of poisonous spiders, and contributing to the dangerous stupidity of our culture. Such censure is not entirely misguided. The predominant effect of Maslow's key idea, at least as it has been transmitted by various acolytes, epigoni, and pseudo-philosophical beachcombers, is far from wholesome. And yet Maslow himself must be distinguished from his following. He was a serious thinker with a vision of human sublimity for a democratic age, revering the extraordinary and sometimes far from democratic minds with whom he consorted, and contended, throughout his life: Aristotle, Nietzsche, Freud. Maslow may indeed have a lot to answer for, even if he did not intend or foresee the worst consequences of his line of thought, but before he is pilloried as a false prophet or worse we need to measure him by his own ideas and not what others have made of them.

Abraham Harold Maslow was born on April 1, 1908, in New York City, the first child of Samuel, a Russian Jewish immigrant who worked as a cooper, and Rose, his first cousin. Abe grew up in Brooklyn, fearing his father, a rough-hewn, hard-drinking man, and loathing his mother, whom he later described as "schizophrenogenic"—the type of mother "who makes crazy people, crazy children." She did her best to terrorize him with promises of divine wrath for conventional childhood misdemeanors; from an early age he would test the efficacy of her admonitions against reality, and when he was not paralyzed or struck blind on the spot for some

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transgression, his suspicion that she was spouting superstitious malarkey was confirmed. Evidently she was a real horror. When he brought home two stray kittens and she found him feeding them milk from one of her good dishes, she dashed the tiny animals' brains out against the basement walls. Maslow wondered why he didn't turn out psychotic. Fortunately, a loving uncle, his mother's brother, watched over him in adolescence and showed him what normality and decency were.

Maslow attended Boys High School in Bedford-Stuyvesant, where, as the novelist Irwin Shaw declared, you could learn everything you needed to know to get out of Brooklyn. There Maslow's taste in reading matter would advance, if that is the word, from Tom Swift and Horatio Alger to Upton Sinclair, *The Nation*, and a series of "socialist classics" that he picked up for a quarter each and read straight through. Socialism and atheism seemed natural as breathing for the youth, but the horrors of Stalinism would put him off his socialist infatuation. Atheism he would cleave to his whole life long, although he would become a peculiar sort of atheist.

Cornell was the university of his dreams—it was the only Ivy League school to take more than a token number of Jews—but his mediocre high school grades meant that the best he could hope for was the City College of New York. After a year there, he also enrolled in night classes at Brooklyn Law School; his father had wanted to be a lawyer, and expected Abe to succeed where he could not. But legal study dealt "only with evil men, and with the sins of mankind," and a class discussion on spite fences—property fences that neighbors erect to annoy one another—prompted Abe to walk out and never come back. His crestfallen father asked him what he intended to study in that case. Abe answered, "Everything."

Maslow managed to transfer to Cornell, getting a nearly free state-sponsored ride by applying to the College of Agriculture, with a plan to pick up liberal arts courses on the side. But even the most congenial of the Ivies made him feel unwelcome, as a Jew. Waiting tables at a fraternity house, where none of the brothers deigned to speak to him, filled him with resentment that he held onto for years. He lasted a semester, then fled back to City College.

A single book he was assigned to read there, in a class on philosophy of civilization, directed him to his life's work: *Folkways*, by the Social Darwinist William Graham Sumner. Sumner presented the plenum of human cultures in its horripilating variety, lingering over the most savage customs of the most savage peoples—cannibalism, incest, demonolatry—and not exempting our own civilization, with its all too recent history of slavery and religious persecution. Only militant reason, embodied by the few best

men, could hope to dislodge the black-hearted masses from their horror-show tastes. In a mood of virtual transport, Maslow vowed to make himself one of those heroes of virtuous rationality.

Overlooked Possibilities

The discovery of behaviorist psychology, in the work of its American founder, John B. Watson, made Maslow's ambition more specific. At the height of his fame during Maslow's college years, Watson purported to demonstrate that, like Pavlov's famous salivating dogs, human beings were wired for stimulus-response behavior, and could be conditioned to operate with enhanced moral efficiency; benevolent science could rid the

Abraham Maslow's Writings

Motivation and Personality

Harper & Row ~ 1954 ~ 369 pp.

Maslow on Management [originally *Eupsychian Management*]

Wiley ~ 1998 [originally published 1962] ~ 312 pp.

Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences

Penguin ~ originally published 1964 ~ 123 pp.

The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance

Regnery ~ originally published 1966 ~ 168 pp.

The Farther Reaches of Human Nature

Penguin ~ originally published 1971 ~ 407 pp.

The Journals of A. H. Maslow (two volumes)

Brooks/Cole ~ 1979 ~ 1,329 pp.

The Maslow Business Reader, ed. Deborah C. Stephens

Wiley ~ 2000 ~ 324 pp.

Biographies of Maslow

The Right to Be Human: A Biography of Abraham Maslow

By Edward Hoffman ~ St. Martin's Press ~ 1988

A. H. Maslow: An Intellectual Portrait

By Richard J. Lowry ~ Brooks/Cole ~ 1973

New Pathways in Psychology: Maslow and the Post-Freudian Revolution

By Colin Wilson ~ New American Library ~ 1974

world of unreason and its attendant cruelties. Superstitious barbarians such as Abe's mother would be reprogrammed to think clearly and cherish their sons and helpless kittens. Anti-Semitic yahoos would accept Jews as equals. Maslow was smitten with the untold possibilities for human improvement.

He headed off to the University of Wisconsin, famously progressive, with the confidence that he was embarking on a mission to transform mankind. Maslow worked hard and learned the ropes, but his yearning for higher things was stymied. The heroes he expected to find as mentors and colleagues failed to materialize; the professors and students reminded him of businessmen and politicians, out to make a handsome career for themselves, blind to ultimate concerns. His diary entries on the subject fumed with contempt. "They seem to be a bunch of intellectual castrates. . . . But God dammit, I'll keep my own intellectual virility if it kills me. To hell with their jobs."

Monkeys saved him from despair, and indeed would lead him out of the wilderness of behaviorist orthodoxy. From research in animal food preference, Maslow concluded that in higher animals such as monkeys, even a basic physiological need like hunger is not circumscribed by survival instinct: monkeys that have satisfied their hunger will go for delicacies such as peanuts and chocolates while they refuse their dietary staples. The behaviorist insistence that survival drives govern all animal behavior was mistaken. And what goes for monkeys must go for human beings.

Further monkey research, for his doctoral dissertation, investigated sexual behavior. Monkeys in a group mount each other all day long, and Maslow found that the dominant monkeys in the social order, whether male or female, mounted the subordinate monkeys, sometimes clearly to demonstrate their power rather than to satisfy their genital urges. Dominance ranking determined who did what and to whom. Maslow suggested that the ideas of Alfred Adler, who in 1911 broke with Freud by declaring that human sexual relations are fundamentally about power, be reconsidered in the light of the monkey behavior.

After an abortive attempt at medical school, Maslow secured a fellowship at Columbia—a real prize in the worst of the Depression—and used it to study sex and dominance in human beings. High-dominance women, he found, enjoyed the greatest sexual variety and pleasure, while low-dominance women found the whole business onerous and degrading. Naturally enough, if with reverent trepidation, Maslow sought out Alfred Adler, who had left Austria and its growing perils for New York, and the two men became master and disciple. But in the end Maslow became too

assertive to retain the master's favor. Adler died of a heart attack in 1937, before they had the chance to reconcile.

Maslow would speak of himself as the luckiest man in the world when it came to the teachers he had. To his mind, New York in the 1930s was like Plato's Athens; some of the finest European psychologists had gathered there, many of them Jews escaping Hitler. Erich Fromm, Kurt Koffka, Karen Horney, Max Wertheimer, and Kurt Goldstein all took a generous interest in the intellectual formation of the ardent young Maslow.

It was Goldstein who coined the term self-actualization, reviving the Aristotelian notion of teleology, largely discredited by modern science, and particularly in psychology by stimulus-response theory. Every organism, Goldstein maintained, inherently sought to attain the end it was made for. It was the social psychologist Wertheimer who, along with the pathbreaking anthropologist Ruth Benedict, would provide Maslow with the living model of self-actualizing humanity. These two intellectuals were the finest persons Maslow knew, and not in intellect alone; several cuts above the ordinary run in most every crucial respect, they simply had a genius for living. "It was as if they came from another planet," Maslow would goggle, years later. Their mere presence charged the atmosphere anywhere they went. A party that Maslow threw and to which Benedict and Wertheimer came turned into a festival of preternatural congeniality, and the host knew it was they who radiated the warmth and intelligence that kindled everyone's best nature. Certain people just shone as exemplars of wholeness, intensity, virtue, achievement, and delight; Maslow was left wondering what an entire society led by such men and women might achieve. This astonishment at the most remarkable human beings stoked his intellectual fires as nothing had before.

It would become Maslow's life's work to describe such people, to explain their excellence, and to spread the word to the multitudes that this richness was in fact an inborn human possession, lost to most by dint of social malfeasance and emotional attrition, recoverable on a wide scale by overthrowing the diminished and oppressive view of mankind that had passed for wisdom down the millennia. There are superb possibilities that men are intended to realize, and neither behaviorism nor Freudianism pointed anywhere near them. Maslow became confident that he would succeed where his predecessors had failed, not only in the scientific description of what man is, but in the moral prescription for the best that man can become.

At Ruth Benedict's urging, in 1938 Maslow undertook anthropological fieldwork in Alberta with the North Blackfoot Indians. Nearly all of

the Blackfoot, he discovered, displayed a level of emotional security that only the upper percentiles of the U.S. population reached, and Maslow attributed this in large measure to the Indians' emphasis on personal responsibility instilled from early childhood. For example, a seven-year-old boy faced with a tough decision would go off into the woods by himself for several days to think things over. A demanding but loving upbringing enhanced the essential goodness and strength with which these children were born. Perhaps most important, their inborn virtues were not leached away. That is to say, their culture did not erode their fundamental humanity; masses in ostensibly more advanced societies were not so fortunate. The combination of tenderness and hardiness that Maslow saw in the Blackfoot helped shape his ideas of the best sort of character. It was a universal ideal, then, that his fieldwork directed him toward, rather than a culturally specific one. Cultural relativism had to go. What all people shared in the best of their nature overrode even the differences between races, classes, or civilizations. Maslow's project involved getting at the vital core of Man, pure and simple.

The Greatness Within

There would be divagations from Maslow's advance on the sanctum of human excellence. The best in man allured him, but his profession nevertheless focused on the worst, not without reason; and in 1941, as the worst was swinging into high gear, and as he was working toward tenure at Brooklyn College, he coauthored the textbook *Principles of Abnormal Psychology*. (After fourteen years at Brooklyn, he lit out for Brandeis University, where he would remain until 1968.)

Still, he could not remain in the rut carved by the legions of Freudian pessimists. His 1943 paper "Theory of Human Motivation" (collected in his 1954 book, *Motivation and Personality*, which in time would be hailed as having radically changed the field) describes the human need that demands to be satisfied after more basic or prepotent needs—for food, safety, shelter, sex, love, self-esteem, as he arranges them in his famous hierarchy—have been met: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. He must be true to his own nature. This need we may call self-actualization." Maslow goes on to say that he is revising Kurt Goldstein's use of that term for a more exclusive purpose. "It refers to man's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might

be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.”

In May 1945, tired of “fussing along for some years,” Maslow began in dogged earnest his formal investigation of optimum functioning, and started a GHB (Good Human Being) notebook. At first he thought that students would be the primary subjects of his study. Observing them in class, checking their emotional security evaluations, interviewing them, reading their memoranda of the interview, and conducting Rorschach tests were the basic procedures. Maslow encountered problems straight-away, by his own judgment. Among the prospects he picked many more girls than boys, and most of the girls he picked were good-looking; nasty, smug specimens often scored high on security; nearly every candidate pulled a pretty twisted Rorschach; whether American twenty-year-olds could even be GHBs was a problematic question. Most of his students, especially the women, disappointed him, with their psychic drabness beneath a pert exterior. “Their faces look so much more promising than they actually are. They’re all well enough adjusted, happy, psychiatrically untroubled, etc., but still they have no flame, spark, plan, excitement, goal dedication, feeling of responsibility.” He despised some of the kids for their numbing blandness: being well-adjusted to a stifling culture was often evidence of deep-rooted sickness of soul. Mediocrity appeared to be the general lot, but the exceptions thrilled Maslow sufficiently that he refused to accept mediocrity as the inevitable lot of most. Democratic hopefulness burned high in Maslow’s temperament, and he believed relentlessly that greatness, or at any rate fulfillment, must be within reach of all. Something better than normality was needed for human flourishing; in the peroration to “What Psychology Can Learn from Existentialism,” collected in his volume *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1962), Maslow would memorably inveigh against the “psychopathology of the average.”

Maslow had the soul of a Romantic poet, though with a social scientist’s rather unfortunate prose style, and an all but boundless confidence in science rightly understood, which is to say, touched with rare inspiration. In *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance* (1966), Maslow extolled the scientific life at its best as a sacred calling:

Science at its highest level is ultimately the organization of, the systematic pursuit of, and the enjoyment of wonder, awe, and mystery...
Science can be the religion of the nonreligious, the poetry of the non-poet, the art of the man who cannot paint, the humor of the serious

man, and the lovemaking of the inhibited and shy man. Not only does science begin in wonder; it also ends in wonder.

But in science too he distinguished between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The usual timid conformity of workaday scientists who pored over small questions and ignored momentous ones was not for him. Maslow wanted to sail beyond the limits of the known intellectual world. He chose the company of greatness, studying the sublime minds of the past (though his learning did not rival Freud's or Jung's). And he sought greatness for himself. From his graduate school days he plotted a magnum opus, a grand psychological *summa*; this unified field theory never came off, but his work in self-actualization proved transformative.

Never before had a thinker aimed so high in the name of all humanity and remained sensible. Emerson had predicted extraordinary things for democratic men, but his enthusiasm had carried him into folly, as he roared, "Shall I not treat all men as gods?" Maslow never proclaimed even the best people to be anything but human, susceptible to all-too-human flaws; but that did not mean he hoped for anything less than the remarkable for everyone. The essential question was not what made Beethoven Beethoven, but why everyone is not a Beethoven. Maslow was not his own dupe, and knew well that musical or any other artistic genius is not bestowed equally, but he did hold that every person ought to be able to excel and find fulfillment in his work, whatever it was. Any work done with mastery possessed high dignity in his eyes. In his journal for November 20, 1969, he wrote: "I think of the carpenter who did our deck & certainly acted like an emperor, totally self-respecting and doing a *fine* job. Psychologically, the immersion in the project & the result for self-respect, self-acceptance, & competence-pride were all the same as Beethoven composing—subjectively, anyway." This might seem an extravagant claim, partaking of hyper-democratic fantasy, yet one sees the point of it: it is not only the brain-workers of the most esteemed professions who can know the pleasures of fulfilling their natures; indeed, many tradesmen and even menial laborers are more worthy of respect than a good many artists, intellectuals, lawyers, political men. It was how one went about his work that really set a man apart in Maslow's mind; he was himself a devoted scholar, teacher, consultant, lecturer, and writer, who might be said to have worked himself into a fatal heart attack at the age of sixty-two.

Love ran a close second to work. Maslow had fallen in love with his first cousin Bertha Goodman as a teenager, and he would always speak of their first kiss as one of the most thrilling moments of his life—a peak

experience that altered him for good. The couple remained married until his death, and he never touched another woman. He faulted Aristotle for enthroning philosophy, the love of wisdom, above love of another person, or of humanity at large; Maslow thought them equal. Aristotle of course believed that the true philosopher alone was self-sufficient, needing only his own mind for his happiness, which excelled that of all other men; to love someone else was evidence of deficiency, of an incompleteness and unseemly neediness in one's own nature. It was perhaps out of his wrestling with Aristotle that Maslow drew the distinction between "deficiency needs" and "Being values"; as Maslow defines the two in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (published posthumously in 1971), the former treat other persons as means to an end, the latter deal with "persons insofar as they are ends-in-themselves (sacred, unique, noncomparable, equally valuable with every other person rather than as instruments or means-to-ends)." Clearly Being-value is not limited to romantic love; it can also embrace a host of persons, all of whom deserve and receive equal regard, while each remains singular and irreplaceable.

Mystery and Management

So Maslow taught the pleasures of work and love—the very activities that Freud presented as the human fundamentals. However, where for Freud they were really the be-all and end-all of our lives, for Maslow there was another sort of experience that transcended, encompassed, and transfigured these. Although, like Freud, Maslow was an unyielding lifelong atheist, unlike Freud he came to believe that human beings have always had experiences that can only be called genuinely religious. These "peak-experiences," as he calls them in *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (1964), by no means reveal the One True God, Who Maslow remains certain does not exist, but rather reveal to the persons enjoying the peak the best part of themselves. Religious ecstasy is the ultimate celebration of the self. For as man's understanding of and regard for himself have grown, his dependence on the imaginary supernatural has dwindled, so that now the natural is quite enough to explain the highest things—which is to say, as Maslow saw them, the highest human things. Freud was as wrong as could be in asserting that religious feeling is an emotional perversion—an obsessional neurosis arising from the Oedipus complex, as Freud insisted in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Instead, Maslow declares that religious experience in its pure form, the mystic transport unadulterated by the legalism of priestcraft, represents the

ultimate human rapture. His humanistic psychology accepts what Freud and others reject: if man is the measure of all things, then nothing human can be left out of the true science of man, including the aspects of his experience that conventional science has dismissed as supernatural and therefore closed to reason.

The vastness of the shimmering mystery humbles Maslow. He suspects that the ultimate truths may always remain hidden from the psychologists, whose aim is to know man's place in the natural order. Modern psychology has the advantage of previous philosophy, including the thought of the masters, Maslow believes; modern men simply know more about the world than Plato or Aristotle or Spinoza did. Yet the new science of the higher humanity may in the end have to content itself with posing questions rather than providing answers.

What Maslow knew for certain was that the old answers were wrong. Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Freudianism, existentialism all "sold human nature short," as he put it. He was there to apply the corrective.

Of these rival claimants to supreme understanding, Freud of course loomed largest in Maslow's sights. To turn neurotic illness into ordinary unhappiness, which was what Freud professed to do in the practice of psychoanalysis, Maslow found inadequate and unacceptable. While Maslow remained respectful, indeed reverent, toward Freud and the clinical achievements of psychodynamic therapy, his own psychology had more to do with the heights of philosophy or religion than with medicine in all its ugliness. Freud dwells on inescapable psychic origins, the muck we will never be free of but might (with therapy) come to terms with; Maslow on the other hand relishes the most magnificent possibilities.

Five choice paragraphs in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* take on the master's most imposing assertions. "His one big mistake, which we are correcting now, is that he thought of the unconscious merely as undesirable evil. But unconsciousness carries in it also the roots of creativeness, of joy, of happiness, of goodness, of its own human ethics and values." Freud's background in neurology led him to a search for a positivistic psychology reducible to chemical processes. "This is what he dedicated himself to. He himself disproved his point, of course." The point has hardly been disproved; psychiatry since Maslow's day has made tremendous advances in the treatment of serious mental illness with psychotropic medication. Yet it is true that the very nature of a man like Freud himself calls some of his theory into question. The need to know that Freud personified cannot be reduced to endocrine surges or neural impulses: it bespeaks a

higher nature, which operates by its own laws—what used to be called a soul. “And about this higher nature that I claim we have discovered, the question is, how do we explain it? The Freudian explanation has been reductive. Explain it away. If I am a kind man, this is a reaction formation against my rage to kill. Somehow, here the killing is more basic than the kindness. And the kindness is a way of trying to cover up, repress, and defend myself against realizing the fact that I am truly a murderer.... Somehow there is the begging of the question that is so obvious now. Why did [Freud] not say, for instance, that maybe killing people was a reaction formation against loving them? It is just as legitimate a conclusion and, as a matter of fact, more true for many people.”

Contrary to Freud, the irreducible impulses are not all destructive, and goodness is not a discreet veil for one’s inherent evil. Accordingly, the terms by which men are made civilized need not be onerous as a choke collar, but may indeed offer the conditions of individual fulfillment. One might gather from Maslow’s preoccupations that the cultivation of personal excellence is the end of human life, and it is true enough that each person has his own particular excellence to cultivate. Yet Maslow’s man is a political animal not only insofar as that helps him become himself, but for the general benefit. The best possible life is to be found in a state of “synergy,” in which individual energies serve the social good and social arrangements enhance individual happiness.

Eupsychia was the name Maslow invented for the synergistic society at its best, a community of “good souls”; his model was an imaginary island culture of a thousand self-actualizing people. In the summer of 1962 he got an intellectual’s rare opportunity to see how this theory might affect practice, when the managerial innovator Andrew Kay, president of the manufacturing firm Non-Linear Systems, impressed by *Motivation and Personality*, invited Maslow to his California plant as a free-floating researcher and consultant. From this experience Maslow wrote *Eupsychian Management*, which became one of the essential business texts and made Maslow a major figure in the realm of business advice. To change the world remained Maslow’s aim, but that could not be done by individual psychotherapy, which is a logistical impossibility in any case, nor even by improved schooling; as the world of work has an enormous impact on most everybody’s life, to make the workplace as amenable as possible to the highest human needs or meta-motivations offered perhaps the best chance of creating a healthy society. Maslow declared, “The only happy people I know are the ones who are working well at something they consider important.” The optimum managerial strategy treats workers as trust-

worthy, eager to achieve, capable of good teamwork, improvable, wanting to respect or even love their boss, preferring responsibility to passivity, desiring meaning to their efforts, needing their individuality acknowledged, responding to deserved public appreciation, and hating boredom. Although rejecting the time-honored iron-fisted methods of keeping workers in line, Maslow recognized that not everyone would respond well to the more generous and enlightened approach; he revised downward some of the more unrealistic expectations of his distinguished predecessors in management advice Peter Drucker and Douglas McGregor.

Sixties Icon (and Critic)

Yet Maslow's reputation is not one of intellectual sobriety, and that reputation is largely undeserved. His association with Esalen in Big Sur, California—the vanguard institution of the New Age, cynosure for most every crackpot idea to come out of the Sixties—has tarred him as an irresponsible zealot for the untamed self. That association came about as a stroke of blind luck, and did not go as deep as has been reputed. Maslow and his wife were driving along the Pacific Coast Highway one night, needed a place to stay, and pulled into the driveway of Big Sur Hot Springs, later to be known as the Esalen Institute. The desk clerk was downright rude until he read Maslow's signature in the guest register, then turned reverential; it happened that everyone there was reading *Toward a Psychology of Being* and loving it. Maslow became an Esalen regular, for a time, but his insistence on intellectual discipline did not suit the place. One of his lectures was interrupted when a prominent resident, Fritz Perls, curled himself into the fetal position at his feet, offended by Maslow's presumption in teaching about self-actualization rather than simply letting everyone freely self-actualize. In due course Maslow cut himself loose from this foolishness.

No one who has read Maslow's journals will readily mistake him for a typical wild child of the Sixties. Spontaneity and transcendence of established values, he maintained, come legitimately only after one has attained mastery through a demanding intellectual and spiritual apprenticeship; for instance, he had to spend years trying to understand Freud before he could reject him. In September 1969 he wrote, "peak-experiences are *not* a way of life, & you really can't build a style of life upon them exclusively. And it seems not to work when you try to get them regularly via LSD or weekend workshops at Esalen." The thrill of peak experiences may provide the impetus for the pursuit of excellence, but it is the plateau

experiences of day-to-day work and love that constitute the heart of a self-actualizing life; perhaps Maslow and Freud were not so far apart on this point. An orderly domestic routine is hardly the living death the youth culture fears and loathes—quite the contrary. “The kids don’t understand their elders’ pleasures, judging them always by adolescent, phallic, motorcycle, rock-music, frenetic standards, & can’t understand that they may be living a good life & having a wonderful time, even if they do prefer quiet to noise & activity, privacy to a gang, & middle-class virtues to hysterical & Dionysian ones.”

The Sixties had most everything wrong, in Maslow’s view. The liberal pieties failed to address true human nature, which is not one of inborn Rousseauian innocence that only corrupt society can rot; rather, it can turn evil even under temperate circumstances. The liberals, he wrote, were mired in “cultural & ethical relativism—except the puzzle that they’ll forgive anybody else anything, refusing to say ‘That is evil!’ while at the same time forgiving *themselves* nothing, or anyway forgiving their brothers nothing, so they *do* mind ‘Red-baiting’ but don’t mind ‘American baiting.’”

The ascendancy of the trashy and indecent in supposedly high culture galled Maslow; he wanted the normal to be accorded primacy of place, as he wrote on December 9, 1967:

The university world can now, I think, be essentially characterized as value-confused, value-mistrusting, counter-valuing, value-hating. They don’t know right from wrong & maybe don’t even believe it’s *possible*, or that there are such things. Result of Marxism, Freud, cultural relativism, pseudo-anthropology, the abdication of the philosophers, the physicalism of the psychologists, the value-free sociologists, etc.

He even goes so far as to speculate whether the physical runtiness of the typical liberal intellectual shapes his thinking. “Does he *identify* with the loser, unconsciously feeling himself to be a loser? And to admire & follow the dictator, the violent one, the loud-mouth, the paranoid? Why did the intellectuals go for Stalin? And why are they not horrified by dictatorship today, if only it is on the Left side? Why don’t they *love* the Bill of Rights?”

Nietzsche Lite

Maslow sounds full of Nietzschean fire in his condemnation of the men of *ressentiment*, for whom the world is not good enough because they are not good enough for the world. Both Maslow’s animadversions and his

exaltations owe a great deal to Nietzschean precedent. In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, a nearly rhapsodic voice exhorts the reader to discover his true self and live according to his discovery: “Do you want to find out what you ought to be? Then find out who you are! ‘Become what thou art!’ The description of what one ought to be is almost the same as the description of what one deeply is.” The command “Become what thou art!” is an inexact quotation from Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*: “*What does your conscience say?—‘You shall become the person you are.’*” Nietzsche derides the obsolescent “moral chatter” that impedes the heroic self and proclaims a new commandment for the self-commanding: “We, however, *want to become those we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.” And the subtitle of his book *Ecce Homo* (published 1908) is *How One Becomes What One Is*. Of course, certain of the virtues prescribed in Nietzschean self-becoming are rather too hard-edged and warlike for democratic tastes, and Maslow’s delicate qualification “almost the same” suggests that he knows the dangers involved in the Nietzschean project. Maslow’s is a more warm-hearted undertaking, which emphasizes the tender, altruistic virtues, and which better suits the American temperament than Nietzsche’s calling down the lightning does.

Still, Maslow echoes and amplifies Nietzsche’s heroic belief that the supreme virtue is cosmic gratitude—a belief all the more heroic for Nietzsche’s terrible suffering from syphilis and the indifference with which his greatest work was greeted in his lifetime. There is no God and an eagle feasts daily on your liver, just as it tormented Prometheus, who was cursed for bringing the fire of knowledge to man; but the best men still love their lives. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche introduces the most potent and fearsome of modern myths, that of the eternal recurrence: if a demon were to light on your shoulder and tell you that you would live your life over and over again forever, unchanged in every detail, would you be sick with horror or beside yourself in rapture? *Amor fati*, love of fate, is the joyous acceptance of the eternal recurrence: “And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.” Maslow’s reflections on transcendence in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* eloquently recall *amor fati*. “To yield to one’s destiny or fate and to fuse with it, to love it in the Spinoza sense or in the Taoistic sense. To embrace, lovingly, one’s own destiny.”

Yet Maslow’s love of one’s destiny is not quite the same as Nietzsche’s. Maslow finds this love in renunciation of the powers in which men customarily take most pride. “Transcendence of one’s own will (in favor of

the spirit of ‘not my will be done but Thine.’)” For Nietzsche, on the other hand, to love one’s fate is to know the ultimate triumph of one’s own will. Nietzsche’s love of fate is more self-assertion than resignation, Maslow’s more resignation than self-assertion. This is the difference between classical Greek tragedy and the Passion of Christ, the doomed warrior’s barbaric joy and the suffering god-man’s blessed quietude. The Christian spirit that Maslow invokes enjoys a more welcoming audience among modern democrats than the Homeric or Sophoclean. Maslow offers a sort of Nietzsche Lite for those who prefer a less bitter and less intoxicating brew.

Another crucial difference between Maslow and Nietzsche is in the matter of fact and value. Nietzsche was a founding father of the fact-value dichotomy that governs modern philosophy and social science: what passes for reality is but a human interpretation of the world, partial in both senses of that word; values are what men make of these ostensible facts, and the death of God has multiplied these values into a newborn chaos. As he wrote in *The Gay Science*, “Rather has the world become ‘infinite’ for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility *that it may include infinite interpretations.*” Maslow could not abide this welter of uncertainty. Some moral truths were so obvious to him that he refused to suffer their manifold distortions in the fun-house mirrors of fashionable thinking. Ancient ways of taking in the whole picture were best. Perceiving something in its true nature entails knowing its appointed purpose. As he wrote in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, “Facts create oughts! The more clearly something is seen or known, and the more true and unmistakable something becomes, the more ought-quality it acquires. The more ‘is’ something becomes, the more ‘ought’ it becomes—the more requiredness it acquires, the louder it ‘calls for’ particular action.” Against the doctrinaire wavering of social science Maslow sets the Socratic precept that “no man with full knowledge could ever do evil.” Although it has become clear that not all evil stems from ignorance, Maslow writes, Socrates’ teaching does hold largely true. “This is the same as saying that the facts themselves carry, within their own nature, suggestions about what *ought* to be done with them.”

So instruction in good and evil is a less contentious business than Nietzsche and his followers would allow. For Maslow, “the characteristics of being are also the values of being.” As revealed in peak-experiences and exemplified in the lives of self-actualizing people, these “B-values” are truth, goodness, beauty, wholeness, dichotomy-transcendence, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection, necessity, completion, justice, order, simplicity,

richness, effortless, playfulness, self-sufficiency. The B-values bespeak a fixed reality quite unlike Nietzsche's moral spindrift. Although a cunning Nietzschean "interpreter" could make the B-values fit a description of his master's iconic Overman, in fact the sort of person who embodies these values is a far cry from Nietzsche or his foremost hero, Napoleon. The supreme conqueror, Nietzsche writes, located the repository of all the values he deigned to recognize in his sovereign self: "I have the right to answer all accusations against me with an eternal 'That's me.' I am apart from all the world and accept conditions from nobody. I demand subjection even to my fancies, and people should find it quite natural when I yield to this or that distraction." For Maslow such callous egotism is a hideous deformity. The moral ideal of self-actualization rejects the rampaging self of Nietzsche's so-called nobility. In Maslow's view, the superb is not ordinary, but it must be decent.

The Maslovian Hero

For a thinker so unconventionally conventional in his morality, and with a vision so congenial to the American desire for wholesome self-fulfillment, Maslow suffers from extremely parched regard among conservatives. Part of the trouble stems from his Esalen moment, another part from his atheism, which not only offends the devout but seems less intelligent than it does doctrinaire. But mostly his reputation has been torn by what his purported followers have made of his teaching; as W. H. Auden wrote with deft mordancy in his elegy for William Butler Yeats, "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living."

In the hugely successful novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), Ken Kesey portrays the self-actualizing man as exemplary psychopath, a character too seductively explosive for the malign regulatory forces of the Combine (as Kesey calls the military-industrial-governmental-commercial-psychiatric apparatus controlling our Republic) to endure. The protagonist, Randle Patrick McMurphy, trailing a long history of trouble with the law, has contrived to get himself transferred from a prison work farm to a state mental hospital, thinking he can do the time there standing on his head. But his anarchic energy makes him the sworn enemy of Nurse Ratched, whom Kesey draws as the embodiment of all that is evil in starched, priggish, authoritarian, and emasculating womanhood. McMurphy's unabashed and often uproarious scorn for the "Powers" earns him the adoration of the other inmates, whom he considers no crazier than most people on the outside. Chief Broom Bromden, the

Indian schizophrenic narrator, who is six-foot-eight and hugely strong but believes himself puny and helpless, describes his newfound hero in terms taken straight from Maslow:

There was times that week when I'd hear that full-throttled laugh, watch him scratching his belly and stretching and yawning and leaning back to wink at whoever he was joking with, everything to him just as natural as drawing breath, and I'd quit worrying about the Big Nurse and the Combine behind her. I'd think he was strong enough being his own self that he would never back down the way she was hoping he would. I'd think, maybe he truly is something extraordinary. He's what he is, that's it. Maybe that makes him strong enough, being what he is.

McMurphy, vicious in the end, nearly murders the Nurse, after she has driven another patient to suicide; the Nurse, vicious *to* the end, breaks McMurphy. The final scene, in which Chief Bromden smothers to death the lobotomized and vegetative hero, then tears an apparently immovable machine loose from its moorings and hurls it through the window and makes his getaway, is a harrowing triumph, making you want to weep and cheer. Kesey's near-genius at creating sympathetic sufferers and villainous oppressors almost causes you to ignore that his is a cartoonish morality, horse opera in the service of ludicrous notions about mental illness, pervasive American soul-devastation, and salvation through criminality and riot. McMurphy is an All-American hero on a foundation of Maslow's ideas, but he is also Nietzsche's Napoleon on a reduced scale, answerable only to his own appetites. Here the self-actualizing man takes on aspects of the morally brutal self Nietzsche extols, and we are supposed to love him for his thuggish effrontery that reads as enviable audacity, his feral cunning that comes off as roguish charm. If this is what became of Maslow's guiding idea, no wonder serious people have a problem with it.

In *Rabbit, Run* (1960), John Updike considers Maslow's keystone idea in a somewhat different light from Kesey. Rabbit Angstrom, a former high school basketball phenom now stuck in a lifeless marriage and a dead-end job, is looking at the Mickey Mouse Club on television.

Jimmie sets aside his smile and guitar and says straight out through the glass, "Know Thyself, a wise old Greek once said. Know Thyself. Now what does this mean, boys and girls? It means, be what you are. Don't try to be Sally or Johnny or Fred next door; be yourself. God doesn't want a tree to be a waterfall, or a flower to be a stone. God gives to each one of us a special talent."

Rabbit's special talent was for basketball; being in the zone, when every move he made was silken and every shot kissed the net, was what he knew of peak experience. Nothing he had known since came close, until he left his wife and took up with a sometime sexual semi-pro; one recalls that Maslow said the two chief sources of peak experience for most people are sex and music, and the greatest of these is sex.

While Updike transforms Rabbit's peaks into his customary effulgent prose, what Rabbit makes of them is dubious. When a feckless minister trying to return Rabbit to his pen asks if he thinks God wants him to make his wife suffer, Rabbit asks in response whether God wants a waterfall to be a tree. Popular culture has absorbed the Maslovian illumination, and turned it into a mind-darkening platitude, ready to hand as an excuse for all manner of coarse, boneheaded, and vicious behavior. It is hard to tell, though, how much Updike condemns Rabbit for being Rabbit; the life he is running from is certainly unappetizing, and even his cowardly flight from all responsibility may be lifesaving, if only for him. (His wife, who gets drunk when he does not return home one night, fumbles their baby in the bathtub, and the little girl drowns: he flees the funeral.) At best Rabbit is an ordinary man once remarkable at a game and now longing for release from ordinariness. At worst he is a consummately self-absorbed fool who believes he has unlocked the secret of being: "If you have the guts to be yourself," he says, "other people'll pay your price."

It is a rare American today whose most cherished desire is loftier or purer or bolder than simply and happily to be himself, and the peculiar direction this desire has taken represents a sharp detour from the road cleared by Abraham Maslow. Maslow had a nobler humanity in mind than the one our cult of the self produces in barbaric multitudes. Were he alive today, he would likely prefer to have his name erased from the rolls of the most influential thinkers of the second half of the American Century: the influence he has had is by no means the influence he wanted. The prospect of a race of moral giants has issued in a breed of selfish twerps, with a sizeable proportion of genuine degenerates. How the highest democratic longing—to realize the best in one's nature—has been debased into a pervasive complacency, even a widespread monstrosity, is more than an interesting question in intellectual history; it is a grave and ongoing public catastrophe.