

“Control and Purpose”
A Scientific and Practical Statement in Response to the UK Riots 2011
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This document is being written in response to the riots that started on Saturday 6th August 2011 in London and spread across the country. I have put my normal work off for a few hours today.

Listening to news reports, two of the most common phrases to emerge from these riots are that the people involved are “out of control”. The most immediate reaction to the news is disbelief. However, many people interviewed have suggested a solution - that the people involved need a “sense of purpose”.

As a society, do we understand what ‘control’ is, and how people can get in and ‘out’ of it? Do we understand what ‘purpose’ is? My contention, and that of many of my colleagues, is that most people, even the most knowledgeable and powerful in society, do not understand what ‘control’ and ‘purpose’ *really* mean. They don’t understand how ‘control’ and ‘purpose’ work, and therefore they only have a limited idea of how to develop and nurture it.

I had thought of calling this post ‘A Wake Up Call’ but it is more than that. These events need a different *mindset* – one that puts insight into action. The same could be said of the many other emergencies we are facing as a society – terrorism, environmental destruction and escalating public health problems. This mindset is a ‘call to arms’ - those people who believe that they are knowledgeable, influential, intelligent, thoughtful and caring in their everyday lives need to prepare themselves for a bigger fight than the ones going on in the cities around the UK. This is the long game. These influential and responsible people in society need to *truly* understand the human condition, and act on it in the best way they can. Pick up a brush to sweep the streets, a tissue to comfort your crying partner, or a ball to throw to your neighbour’s son, listen to what your family is going through, and put the book back in the drawer. Those of us who engage in lofty academic pursuits, who see the pursuit of knowledge as a right rather than a privilege, those of us who cower from engagement with our communities, or feather our own financial nest, need to meet our opposites at the riot lines, and in our everyday lives, and stare them in the face: “Who are you? What are you thinking? What do you want?”

It is my contention that much of the ‘knowledge’ we have pursued over centuries within science and the humanities is not useful to us, may be misguided and - at its worst (or sometimes at its most effective) - highly destructive. The pursuit of knowledge is not a human right. Neither is it as important as a roof over our heads, a kind word or the love of a friend. It is a resource that needs to be used wisely, and tested for its validity at every opportunity. It is very easy for a scientific movement to grow like a religion without questioning itself. It is normal for a religion to do that because religion is based on faith rather than theory or evidence. Science cannot work in this way. But science needs a purpose too, and seeking knowledge for the sake of it, or to support one’s own career, is not productive way of serving society.

I would propose that - if what we need to understand is how people get ‘out of control’, how people fear ‘loss of control’ when they experience it in themselves and others, and how to develop a sense of purpose and help others to develop a sense of purpose - then we need a theory of control and purpose and focus our energies on that. Presumably if these concepts are so pertinent in people’s minds during emergencies like the one happening now, then they are fundamental to

being human, or even to being alive. Many of us have a usable, everyday understanding of control and purpose, but a *scientific theory* will greatly benefit how they are applied.

Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) is a theory of how 'control' works to the level of detail that control can be modelled with precision. It regards life as a process of control and proposes that all living things are purposeful in doing what they do.

To put it simply, people need a *goal*, a *means*, a *resource* and they need to *pay attention* to the results – which are the effects on our own experiences. These elements weave together in a closed circle that builds control. The goal is what the person can hold in mind and strive towards – to be a fireman, to be loyal, to be a good son or daughter. In PCT this is known as a *reference value*. The means are the behaviours, skills, work, emotional attunement to others and ways of thinking (*outputs*) that a person exercises to achieve this goal. The resource is the feature of the environment, including people around us, who can help us achieve this goal. Paying attention to our own experiences closes the loop because we *perceive* our results and *compare* them to our goal. If we have not reached our goal yet, we continue to develop the means to achieve it. When this cycle is allowed to prosper at a young age, a sense of purpose is built up that *brings in* the local environment and one's own community *as part of one's own sense of purpose* rather than as a force to be challenged and attacked.

PCT may explain how conflicting attempts to control an experience (e.g. to express versus suppress anger) get 'out of control' in response to conflict. Conflict inside a person is often felt as agitation, frustration and anger. It is heightened when a person develops in a parenting environment and a wider society that tries to counter the person's own needs and goals, that is overcontrolling, or only seems to be interested in its own needs (this is known as *arbitrary control*).

People growing up in such an environment may develop a desire to wreak revenge, get something back, and regain temporary power over others or a society that they perceive to be (and often can be) uncaring, unfair, aloof and prejudiced. They may keep this motive under control merely for fear of being caught and punished or to temporarily appease a critical and dominant force. But this is a state of conflict and can spin 'out of control' when the opportunity to exercise this revenge occurs – such as the group anonymity provided by a police force that is dwarfed by the sheer number of rioters. Of course, it is the observers who regard this behaviour as 'out of control' – it is very much *in control* with respect to the individual who is exercising this destructive motive *at that time* – they want to rob and destroy material things. Also, what they are doing is, for now, part of a process of *collective control* whereby a number of people converge on the same goal to increase their means to achieve it. Yet, it is unlikely that some of these young people will feel that their behaviour fits with their deeper motives when they *reflect* on their behaviour some time afterwards - as they see how the damage they have caused challenges their emerging values of how to live in the world as an adult. What society can do right now, after regaining its own basic control, is to bring this reflective stage forward by making sure that the rioters involved in criminal acts are held accountable to their actions and given the opportunities to view and understand the results of their actions on the people they care for and their wider society. When this works, as has been found in schemes across the world, the person becomes self-motivated to make amends to others.

But what about prevention? How does a sense of purpose develop in the long term? PCT proposes that every living thing has a sense of purpose, and that humans build this sense of purpose as they

develop increasingly sophisticated skills and ways of perceiving themselves and the world (in a 'hierarchy of perception and control'). The environment that nurtures this development is one in which the child, adolescent and adult are allowed the opportunities to exercise control over their own lives and to learn accordingly. This is achieved through a process known as 'reorganisation' which reduces conflict and promotes new levels of learning in a trial-and-error way. Hence the value of environments that promote this - play, culture, talking openly, listening, paying attention to emotions, and utilising imagination.

So take notice, those of you who are trying to destroy your community right now, and pay attention, those of you who have the power but not the understanding to enforce control and then rebuild these societies from the ruins. This is the long game and it starts here. Study the world, see how it works, listen to people, think about how the world is perceived from the senses of those who look back at you, and think how they are trying to build purpose in their lives. Try to understand these things – act - pay attention to your results - and try again. The solution is a young sapling that will emerge from the dust and grow from the ashes to be a stronger, wiser and kinder society.

There is of course a place for a particular kind of understanding and knowledge in this statement – the 'arms' for intellectuals, if you like, are the technical details to support this statement - including papers on law, sociology, economics and emotion regulation, available at www.pctweb.org. For those of you are not that way inclined, I hope the spirit of this statement provides some encouragement and direction.

Selected References

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