

# Maslow's Theory of Self-Actualization, More or Less Actualized | Brain Blogger

 [brainblogger.com/2013/01/08/maslows-theory-of-self-actualization-more-or-less-actualized/](http://brainblogger.com/2013/01/08/maslows-theory-of-self-actualization-more-or-less-actualized/)

Ann Reitan, PsyD

Maslow created a theory of self-actualization, and it is the topic of this discussion. According to Maslow, self-actualization is a process by which individuals may ascend a hierarchy of needs that is linear as opposed to dialectical. The higher levels of this hierarchy are reached by psychologically robust and healthy self-actualizing individuals. In addition, Maslow



contends that these self-actualizing individuals are highly creative and demonstrate a capacity to resolve dichotomies inherent in ultimate contraries, such as life versus death and freedom versus determinism, as examples. This discussion does not challenge Maslow's theory as much as it extends the ideas postulated by him. Essentially, this argument stresses the synergism of dialectical transcendence implicit in the type of personal growth that Maslow contends is self-actualizing. Further, it is argued that one need not transcend these levels of self-actualization in directly linear and subsequent stages. Lastly, it is postulated that all creative individuals might be capable of self-actualization, independent of their mental health or lack of it.

Self-actualization has been described by Maslow as the ability to transcend levels of physiological, psychological and social needs, to obtain fulfillment of personal needs in terms of life's meaning. He stated this type of growth to be a linear escalation of fulfillment that is represented by a pyramidal hierarchy. The levels that he describes express these needs and their order of hierarchical transcendence. These needs in order of hierarchical ascension are as follow:

1. Physiological needs represented by hunger, thirst, air and sleep;
2. Safety needs, reflecting the needs for security and protection; (Note that safety needs become prominent in situations of social or political instability);
3. The needs for belongingness and love; these needs can take two forms: (a) The drive to fulfill deficiency-based needs for others in a selfish way by taking instead of giving, and (b) The need for

non-possessive and unselfish love based upon growth rather than deficiency;

4. The next level is described by self-esteem needs or the needs for self-respect and positive feelings consequent to admiration; and
5. Lastly, the final stage of self-actualization is reflected by the “being” needs, indicated by the needs for creative self-development in terms of one’s potential toward a goal and a sense of meaning in life.

According to Maslow, creativity is a prominent quality in self-actualizers. It should be noted that self-actualizing people and the needs depicted on his pyramidal hierarchy are descriptively explained by Maslow, as opposed to a explicitly stated in terms of how the fulfillment of them emerges.

Maslow contends that the hierarchical needs must be fulfilled in order of more basic needs to the highest level of needs, or being values, stated to be needs associated with personal meaning in life. The needs within this hierarchy, according to Maslow, must be obtained in a stepwise fashion, such that each level, from survival needs to being values, must be fulfilled at a prior level in order to be fulfilled at the subsequent, higher level. Maslow additionally states, however, that one’s needs may be met only partially at any given moment. It is the contention within this essay that such needs may be fulfilled in any order, given that needs relating to survival may be compromised in a long-term situation even while an individual may be more or less fulfilled in terms of needs for meaning. Additionally, confrontation with life and death may represent a dichotomy that the individual at this point in life is trying to resolve. Seen in this sense, the self-actualized or self-actualizing person may find meaning in confrontation with death and the dialectical contrast between life and death, in particular.

As might be the case if one was faced with the Eriksonian stage of ego integrity versus despair, “being” values or fulfillment regarding life’s meaning may then be actualized even when a person is in a long-term situation of deficiency regarding other needs. Erikson postulated the “ego integrity” versus “despair” stage as feasibly culminating in a sense of meaning in life. A confrontation with life and death may represent a dichotomy that the individual at this point in life is trying to resolve.

Seen in this sense, the self-actualized or self-actualizing person may find meaning in confrontation with death, when safety or physiological needs are threatened. This may be the case regarding the needs of a person who is imprisoned, who finds meaning in his life in spite of incarceration, even while his life may be threatened. Such may have been true of Nelson Mandela, for example, who maintained a sense of meaning and values in the context of imprisonment. Likewise, the individual, Viktor Frankl, was a Holocaust survivor who never relinquished his search that culminated in meaning. Gandhi can be compared with the self-actualizing individual postulated by Maslow. Through non-violent civil disobedience, Gandhi moved India to independence, and he inspired movements for non-violence, civil rights and freedom across the world, in spite of whatever difficulties he endured in terms of satisfying his more basic needs. Personal needs for meaning, such as spiritual needs, may be fulfilled in any circumstance of life. The fact that apparently self-actualized people do find meaning in dire life circumstances for long periods of time lessens support of Maslow’s ideas regarding stepwise fulfillment of the need hierarchy. It is evident that people can find “being values” regarding meaning when they are situated, at least in part, at the lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy. It should be noted that Maslow would certainly agree that these individuals were self-actualized.

Maslow’s goal was to describe psychologically healthy rather than psychologically or mentally unwell individuals. Maslow contended that the “being” needs or needs for personal meaning allow persons who have obtained the highest level in terms of Maslow’s hierarchy to find meaning in life, and they are able to resolve dichotomies such as the “free-will versus determinism”, “good versus evil” and “subject versus object.” Maslow’s understanding of self-actualization, as indicated, is descriptive, and it has been, to an extent, overlooked as a subjectively based composition of ideas, rather than an empirical science, perhaps

largely because self-actualization occurs in the mental realm of the self instead of allowing for observation by the five senses. Additionally and prominently, psychology's focus on mentally unhealthy people results from an effort to solve the problems associated with mental illness, as opposed to Maslow's focus on postulations regarding psychologically healthy individuals.

Persons of evident psychopathology, such as Sylvia Plath, might be recognized to be among self-actualizing individuals. Plath's poem about the birth of her child demonstrated an aspect of her own peak experience in giving birth. In her poem, "Morning Song", she expresses this experience:

*I'm no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind's hand.*

In this, Plath realized personal meaning of what it is to be a mother. Although she had definite indications of mental illness, this did not prevent her from demonstrating creativity in the sense of Maslow's self-actualizers, and she obviously had moments of insight or epiphanies during her life, in spite of having a mental illness, as well. The abundance of creativity that Maslow said to characterize self-actualizing people is quite strong in the mentally ill, who, as a group, demonstrate creativity to a greater extent than is the norm.

As indicated, Maslow stated that the self-actualized person might love creative pursuits, such as reading or writing poetry and enjoying art. In terms of resolution of paradox, a theory of creativity might be postulated as a basis for understanding self-actualization. Creativity may reflect transcendence in terms of self-actualization that relies on reification of the self through experienced self-awareness. This may burgeon from creative activity as experienced by the self-actualized or self-actualizing person. Creativity is both a conscious and an unconscious process; it is both intentional and unintentional. It results, at least in part, from fortuitous accidents that are built upon and therefore utilized in terms of creativity. Art and its appreciation may lead to "peak experiences", as described by Maslow to characterize self-actualizers. Embedded within poetry, for example, are graphic illustrations that may allow a perceptive reader to find transformation on the level of the self by means understanding of metaphor and allegory, and such understanding then could be said to be fundamentally "alive" within the individual, as opposed to dogmatically received by the individual. It is the experience of art both by the artist and the reader, seer or hearer that allows for this type of experience.

Creativity unifies the dichotomy of free-will and determinism, if only in the sense that art relies on both causal and freely willed activity, on the part of both the artist and the receiver of artistic expression. Creativity also allows for unification of subject and object, the self and the other, due to the at least somewhat extant bonding of subject or poet and object or appreciator of art. Conscious and unconscious awareness are to some extent unified through artistic expression and reception, as well. Creativity may reside within the essence of dialectical transcendence.

Clearly, poetry, as only one example of art, is both an intrapersonal and an interpersonal activity for both those who express and those who receive poetic expression. Poetry enhances a recapitulation of the psychological self, thought and emotion, serving a communicative function for the poet and the consequent enactment of self-realization by the audience. Deconstruction and reconstruction of the self becomes possible through poetic expression and recognition of an evolving self. Metaphor and allegory, as used in poetic expression, can be represented as a means of creating permeable boundaries that are nevertheless intact, for both the poet and his audience. Self-actualization through poetic expression and reception, or reflective communication, enhances the psychological health of the individual. Moreover, self-actualization

becomes possible for both the poet and his audience, as both of these entities will find self-recognition through poetic expression, whether through the process of becoming conscious of the meaning of one's own words or the words of others. These same processes are apparent in terms of all forms of art.

Ultimately, self-actualization is defined by creativity. Clearly, people may find transcendence through dialectical processes that allow for anyone to find meaning, as opposed to strictly self-actualizers who may have escalated Maslow's levels of need fulfillment. The merging of thesis and antithesis, culminating in a synthesis of self-realization by means of a personal illumination is expressed at all levels of need fulfillment, even when one's needs remain unfulfilled because of dire circumstances. Spiritual epiphanies find us at markedly difficult times and when needs are compromised severely. This may represent an aspect of the conscious and the unconscious, the intentional and the unintentional creative aspects of self, mind and existence. In contrast to Maslow's contention, any creative individual may have an avenue to being values and meaning. More or less, we are all creative individuals.

*Image via [Pixelbliss](#) / [Shutterstock](#).*

## **Further Reading**