

# I-It Versus I-Thou Science and Society: Introduction to Special Feature on Maslow's (1969) "Toward a Humanistic Biology"

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## Abstract

This special feature centers around *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* co-founder Abraham Maslow's 1969 article, "Toward a Humanistic Biology." My aims for this special feature are to showcase perspectives on and responses to Maslow's article from the vantage point of the early 2020s by multiple generations and iterations of humanistic psychologists. This serves not only to challenge misconceptions of Maslow—and humanistic psychology in general—as a mere historical relic but also to continue updating and contextualizing our foundational canon to make it relevant to new and future generations while also preserving, and without losing sight of, its core and the wisdom of our elders. In this introduction, following a review of advancements in psychology since Maslow's day (including some called for in his 1969 article), I summarize key points and themes from the article and discuss their relevance in today's society. Then, I identify the limitations in and conundrums posed by some of Maslow's statements. Finally, I provide a narrative of the 12 articles that follow in this special feature.

## Keywords

Abraham Maslow, humanistic psychology, science, technology, society

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“Why should [individuals] adjust [themselves] to an unhealthy society? . . .  
If one is not killed, or driven insane, then must one only fit into  
the structure of hate, envy, ambition, and superstition which can be very  
scientific?”

—Krishnamurti

This special feature centers around *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (JHP) co-founder Abraham Maslow’s (1969) article, “Toward a Humanistic Biology.” Written and published during his term as president of the American Psychological Association (APA), it originally appeared in *American Psychologist*<sup>1</sup> and was later republished as the opening chapter in Maslow’s (1971/1993) posthumous compendium, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. The article showcases Maslow’s musings on the practical application of his theorizing (a) on the interdependent, synergistic relationship between psychological and societal health (expanding upon Maslow’s previous writings on *eupsychia*, Maslow, 1961, 1965, 1968, 1971/1993—about which *JHP* recently devoted a special issue, Volume 63, Issue 4, 2023) and (b) on the role of a holistic, *I-Thou*—versus a reductionist, allegedly value-neutral, *I-it*—approach to science for promoting both individual and collective well-being (expanding upon Maslow’s reflections on that topic in his book, *The Psychology of Science*, Maslow, 1966). In particular, Maslow identifies the study of human potentialities and of psychological and social health (that is, self-actualization and the ecological and relational conditions that promote it, Maslow, 1971/1993, 1987, 1999) as models for psychologists to follow in the interest of using I-Thou science to inform the development of a stronger, more equitable, loving, and sustainable society. Maslow (1969) reflected, “We have come to the point in biological history where we now are responsible for our own evolution. We have become self-evolvers. Evolution means selecting and therefore choosing and deciding, and this means *valuing*” (p. 727, emphasis added). Maslow also discussed the applications and implications of promoting the eudaimonic *good society* (using the parlance of his day) via healing the Cartesian mind–body split in Western medicine and psychotherapy and for mindfully and ethically developing and using technologies.

In this introduction, following a review of advancements in psychology since Maslow’s day (including some called for by Maslow in his 1969 article), I summarize key points and themes from the article and concurrently discuss their relevance in today’s society. Then, I identify the limitations in and conundrums posed by some of Maslow’s statements. Finally, I provide a narrative of the 12 articles that follow in this special feature.

My aims for this special feature are to showcase perspectives on and responses to Maslow’s article from the vantage point of the early 2020s by

multiple generations and iterations of humanistic psychologists.<sup>2</sup> This serves not only to challenge misconceptions of Maslow—and humanistic psychology in general—as a mere historical relic (DeRobertis, 2013) but also, in the current era of cancel culture, to identify ways in which today’s humanistic psychologists can continue updating and contextualizing our foundational canon to make it relevant to new and future generations while also preserving—and without losing sight of—its core and the wisdom of our elders.

## Advancements in Psychology Since Maslow’s Time

Reading Maslow’s article today provides a reminder of how much psychology—let alone just the humanistic movement—has evolved since his day. For a few examples, as discussed further in Bland and DeRobertis (2020a), Maslow’s (1969) observations foreshadowed developmental psychologists embracing of the epigenetic principle (p. 726) and of Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s seminal research on moral development—the latter of which Maslow articulated the need for in his 1969 article (p. 726), and both of which are now common fare in introductory psychology textbooks.

Moreover, in addition to numerous research studies that have both directly (see Bland, in press) and indirectly (see S. B. Kaufman, 2020) validated Maslow’s theorizing on facets of psychological health (self-actualization and self-transcendence), more nuanced dimensions of the construct also are identifiable in themes from contemporary theory and research findings on resilience (Southwick & Charney, 2018), wisdom (Aldwin et al., 2019), heroism (Bland, 2019), altruism (Valsala & Menon, 2023), creativity (S. B. Kaufman & Gregoire, 2015), postformal cognition, psychological flexibility, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, locus of control, and well-being (Bland & DeRobertis, 2020a; Compton, 2018; S. B. Kaufman, 2023; Winston, 2016). Researchers also have noted the cross-cultural relevance of characteristics Maslow associated with self-actualization, including “autonomy of thought and action, . . . democratic character structure, and a lack of preoccupation with others’ approval” as well as “concern and tolerance toward all people (as well as nature) rather than towards one’s own social group [alone]” (Winston et al., 2017, p. 307; see also Tay & Diener, 2011). At the same time, as an antidote to the erroneous critique of self-actualization as anything-goes (Daniels, 1988; Geller, 1984; Smith, 1973), Waterman (2022) recently proposed the construct of *maldaimonia* to differentiate ethical from unethical conduct when striving for personally expressive well-being (p. 14).

In addition, in his 1969 article, Maslow emphasized (a) contextualizing psychopathology and problematic behavior as the outcomes of basic needs left unfulfilled by one’s ecological and social circumstances (pp. 733–734) and (b)

both understanding and healing them via relational, Daoistic approaches to psychological science and therapy (p. 730; see also Maslow, 1971/1993, 1987). During the last decade, these emphases on integration of developmental, systemic, and sociocultural factors in clinical conceptualization and practice have increasingly gained legitimacy in the mainstream psychology curriculum (for example, see Castonguay et al., 2021). Recently, this renewed conceptualization also has been echoed in Tyler's (2023) research published in *JHP* on self-actualization processes in psychosis, whereby

psychotic crisis is best understood as an attempt to make sense of traumatic and overwhelming life circumstances in a context of isolation and mistrust. Instead of disease management, relationship building across different perceived realities offers the opportunity to regain social connection and control over one's life. (p. 208)

Meanwhile, in recent years, humanistic psychologists have continued promoting the cultivation and activation of diagnostic alternatives to the medical model. For example, see Kamens et al., 2019 as well as *JHP* Volume 57, Issue 6, 2017; Volume 58, Issue 1, 2018; and Volume 59, Issues 1 and 3, 2019.

Furthermore, humanistic psychologists have been instrumental in the increasing legitimization of qualitative inquiry in mainstream psychology—the fundamental I-Thou attitude of which was called for in Maslow's (1969) article (see also Maslow, 1966), as discussed further in the next section. Each year, findings from growing numbers of qualitative studies are presented at psychology conferences and published in peer-reviewed journals. The research division of the APA has expanded to include the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP) as a section. The organization has successfully advocated for the inclusion of training in qualitative methods in some of APA's accreditation standards, and preparation in qualitative methods has increasingly become a required component of graduate programs in several institutions. For almost 15 years, APA's policy on evidence-based clinical practice has included the contributions of qualitative methods. SQIP's journal is published by APA, and APA Press recently published a series of books and videos on qualitative methods (American Psychological Association, 2021).

## **Implications of Maslow's (1969) Observations Today**

Maslow wrote, "We must have better human beings or else it is quite possible that we may all be wiped out, and even if not wiped out, certainly live in tension and anxiety as a species" (p. 732). He implored that synergistic cultivation of

healthy individuals and healthy social ecology was urgently necessary for humanity to endure—a point recently echoed in Schneider’s (2023) *Life-Enhancing Anxiety*. Furthermore, Maslow expressed deep concern about threats that existed in his time that, arguably, have only intensified in the decades since. In this section, I survey the contemporary relevance of Maslow’s (1969) argumentation in the areas of science; mind–body integration; social ecology, social policy, and basic need fulfillment; existential threats; technocracy; technology and authoritarianism; and artificial intelligence (AI).

## Science

Along with other founding humanistic psychologists (see DeRobertis & Bland, 2021), Maslow (1969) cautioned that the unreflective I-it stance toward science as value-free and value-neutral is not only insufficient for humanity to endure (p. 727) but also “extremely dangerous,” “amoral,” and possibly even “antimoral” in its failure to protect and promote the common good (p. 733). Applied specifically to psychology, he contended that, if psychologists wish to understand psychological health, it is necessary to move beyond decontextualized manipulation and control based on *a priori* and/or *etic* assumptions (pp. 730–731) and beyond a prescriptive approach based on surface variables (p. 727). Alternatively, he advocated for an I-Thou, or Daoistic, stance that involves getting out of the way and letting phenomena be—that is, reveal themselves on their own terms (p. 729)—while working toward understanding based on combination of, on one hand, interpersonal encounter and dialogue and, on the other hand, critical thinking and expertise (p. 730).<sup>3</sup> For Maslow, the I-Thou approach applies not only to research but also to therapy. His insights anticipated the development of person-centered treatment planning and for collaborative approaches to therapy as alternatives to those that place the therapist squarely in the expert role (p. 730).

In addition, Maslow cautioned against methodolatry and monoculture in psychological science and psychotherapy (p. 724) and instead he promoted pluralism and choosing the right approach and method to meet the demands of the research question or client concern, not the other way around (p. 731). Over a half-century later, despite the progress discussed above, the need remains for epistemological and methodological diversity—along with theoretical expansion and integration—to address the needs of a fast-paced, distracted, survival-focused, experientially-avoidant, interpersonally-isolated, rating- and metric-centered, systems blind, toxically-masculine, inequitized, traumatized, polarized, postmodern, post-truth, post-pandemic society-in-transition.

Furthermore, Maslow (1969) attributed the cultural fear of scientists as “monsters and horrors” not merely to stereotypical depictions of mad

scientists in movies but, more saliently, to their reputation as propagators of prediction, manipulation, and control (p. 729). Today, that fear has devolved into all-out anti-science (Kakutani, 2018; Nichols, 2017) and into a rise of conspiracy theorists who share a hatred of mainstream elites and who see themselves as victim-warriors fighting against corrupt and powerful forces (LaFrance, 2020). The profound political and moral implications of this animosity toward science are discussed further below.

### *Mind–Body Integration*

Maslow's (1969) suggestion of "a synergic feedback between the pursuit of mental health and physical health" based on an organismic view of illness as being situated homeopathically in *both* intrapersonal and social contexts (p. 733) is particularly relevant today. The stress–disease connection (Harris, 2018; Maté, 2003; van der Kolk, 2015) has become increasingly embraced not only in the mental health community but, importantly, also by physicians, especially as a means of making sense of health disparities among people and communities of color, along with other oppressed, marginalized, and/or exploited groups. To illustrate, Geronimus (2023) proposed the concept of *weathering*, defined as "the physiological effects" and "real, measurable consequences" of living in "communities that bear the brunt of . . . discrimination," which "afflict human bodies all the way down to the cellular level" (pp. 10–11, 14)—a clear representation of Maslow's (1969, 1987) deficient basic needs. The weathering construct provides an alternative to the historical "preoccupation with genetics, individual health behavior, and personal responsibility" that has "blocked our view of other possibilities" (p. 10). Likewise, it also challenges the reductionistic assumptions of traditional neuroscience, which denies the possibility of an autonomous person who experiences the oppression: "*There is nobody up there. . . . All your thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and dreams are entirely a manifestation of a bunch of neurons firing or not firing*" (Livingstone, 2014, p. 10, italics in original).

### *Social Ecology, Social Policy, and Basic Need Fulfillment*

Evoking Krishnamurti's epigram at the beginning of this article, Maslow (1969) proposed that, "to some extent[,] the goodness or badness of a person depends upon the social institutions and arrangements in which [one finds oneself]" (p. 732). Despite the seeming dualism in his proposition, in context, Maslow was lamenting human nature having typically been "underrated" and therefore "sold short" in the face of limited models of human possibility and potential (p. 726). He cautioned that the myopic images propagated by

value-free science would seep into the greater culture and lower people's expectations of themselves—and, therefore, uphold a societal status quo characterized by mechanization, materialism, bureaucratization, authoritarianism, conformity, compartmentalization of experience, and disempowerment of individual authenticity (Arons, 2020). For a contemporary illustration, Howell et al.'s (2020) research published in *JHP* demonstrated abysmal engagement with natural, artistic, and moral forms of beauty that arguably stem from individual and social pathologies (materialism, hopelessness, alienation from nature) comparable with Maslow's (1971/1993) *desacralization* (mistrust of and disregard for self-actualizing values based on deficiency-needs).

As an alternative, Maslow proposed characteristics of eudaimonic flourishing (authentic freedom, awe-based creative living, and social justice; see Dillon, 2020) that were inspired by the Greek conceptualization of *the good* (see Bland & Swords, 2023) as wholeness (Arons, 1999). Likewise, in alignment with his belief that the self-actualizing person is not extraordinary with something added but, rather, the “ordinary [person] with nothing taken away” (as cited in Frager & Fadiman, 2013, p. 303), Maslow was wary of overinflating “the saints and sages and great leaders of history” as “not human but supernaturally endowed” (p. 726). Rather, he called for the promotion of the good society that “fosters the fullest development of human potentials, of the fullest degree of humanness” (p. 726). He envisioned a transformation of psychology into the scientific exploration of “all those conditions that conduce to the development of the *good* specimen, and to those conditions that inhibit such development” (p. 727, italics added), which, by necessity, “means emergence from the laboratory and into society” (p. 727). Bland and DeRobertis (2020a) summarized developmental research findings that both heed and support Maslow's (1987, 1999) propositions in these areas.

Furthermore, Maslow (1969) observed that “no beautiful constitutions or beautiful programs or laws will be of any consequence unless people are healthy enough, evolved enough, strong enough, good enough to understand them and to want to put them into practice in the right way” (p. 732). For example, despite decades of U.S. laws espousing and promoting an illusory view of civil rights and social justice, without adequate infrastructure to support them, they ultimately proved to be ineffective (Wilber, 2017). That is, policies built on color-blind ideology serve to uphold racial inequities in a different, less conspicuous form (Alexander, 2020; Kendi, 2019) and they preclude fulfillment of Maslowian basic needs for large portions of the population.

In addition, Maslow's comments regarding income tax (which “siphons off benefits for the general population from any single person's good fortune,” p. 732) as preferable to sales tax (that “takes away proportionately more from

poor people than they do from rich people,” p. 732) also remain relevant over a half-century later. Indeed, the idea of a national sales tax replacing annual income tax has recently been floated in the U.S. House of Representatives (A. Kaufman, 2023). Supporting Maslow’s contention, Desmond (2023) observed that (a) being unable to save, impoverished people “will automatically dedicate a higher share of their income to sales tax than families who spend only a portion of theirs” and (b) “when rich families do spend money, they consume more services than poor families, who spend their money on goods (gas, food), which are subject to more sales tax” (p. 94).

### *Existential Threats*

Maslow’s (1969) concern about unrestrained I-it science contributing to humanity’s demise via nuclear warfare is arguably more pressing now than it was then. In January 2023, in light of mounting precarities including the Russia–Ukraine war, the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock forward to 90 seconds to midnight—“the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been” (Mecklin, 2023, p. 2). Moreover, a March 2023 United Nations press release titled *Risk of Nuclear Weapons Use Higher Than at Any Time Since Cold War, Warns Security Council* urged that, in a “new nuclear age,” new weapons “are likely to make crises more common but less predictable” (United Nations, 2023, p. 275).

Another contemporary existential threat related to Maslow’s wariness of I-it science is climate change. Upon the release of a March 2023 report by the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, U.N. secretary-general Antonio Guterres remarked that “humanity is on thin ice” (Rice & Pulver, 2023, para. 4) and implored the need for urgent action. Indeed, during the same week in July 2023, it was reported that (a) excessive groundwater pumping had caused the Earth’s tilt to change over 31 inches since the 1990s (Pultarova, 2023) and (b) Earth’s average temperature had risen to its highest in 125,000 years, attributable to greenhouse gas emissions (Rice, 2023). Furthermore, the World Meteorological Organization anticipates that, by 2027, for the first time, the earth’s temperature could climb 1.5°C (about 2.7°F) above preindustrial levels (Paddison & Gretener, 2023).

### *Technocracy*

Another principal concern expressed by Maslow (1969) involved the I-it mentality out of which technologies were developed and consumed and the impact they could have on interpersonal relations. From today’s perspective, Schneider (2019) added that they “stifle well-rounded, academic intelligence



and deprives our culture of dynamic and motivated workers, caretakers, and leaders.” In the absence of a humanitarian society, bitterness ensues and “leads to hostile and conflicted relationships, narrow political and religious identifications, and ultimately susceptibility to engage in wars” (pp. 46–47).

Schneider (2019) also cautioned against the unrealistic vision of a “conflict-free self” (p. 109) propagated by expanding “addiction to machines” (p. 10) that amounts to “breaking souls” (p. 36). The messiness of human intimacy, creativity, and healthy risk-taking is becoming increasingly supplanted by a “machine model for living” that “emphasizes speed, instant results, and image over substance” (p. 62). Resultingly, conformity ensues in the form of “a kind of stupor [that] incites us to buy things we don’t need,<sup>4</sup> vote for platforms or candidates who oppose our interests, and believe we are our own agents when we have nonconsciously forfeited that agency to others” (p. ii) and “flung the gates open to regimentation and control” (p. 9).

In addition, Carr (2014) cautioned that, despite the appeal of automation for enhancing speed and efficiency and providing “release from what we perceive as toil” (p. 17), it also diminishes complexity and challenge, resulting in “erosion of effort and engagement,” “waning of agency and autonomy,” and “subtle deterioration of skill” (p. 18). With that comes a weakened sense of accomplishment and satisfaction and increased feelings of helplessness in the absence of gadgets. Thus, automation “frees us from that which makes us feel free” (p. 17); it “can take a toll on our work, our talents, and our lives. It can narrow our perspectives and limit our choices. It can open us to surveillance and manipulation” (p. 2). To illustrate, consider the interrelated dynamics, power structures, and impacts of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), identity theft and profiteering via misuse of personal information sold on the dark web, spread of dis-, mis-, and malinformation (Foer, 2017), and, with that, mistrust of expertise and threats to democracy (Nichols, 2017).

Furthermore, Schneider (2019) observed that, today, “the more we court machines, the more machine-like we become” (p. 35). That is, the more calculation, technique, and quantity are emphasized in U.S. society, the more those aspects are cultivated in individuals. “This trend is bolstered by childrearing and educational practices that forfeit wonder, curiosity and intimate reflections on life for those that are packaged, programmed, and business-like” (p. 46). Moreover, in a fast-paced era characterized by information overload and uncertainty, attraction to arbitrary criteria to improve institutional efficiency over expertise has become increasingly common. Muller (2018) described that this *metric fixation*—“the aspiration to replace judgment based on experience with standardized measurement” that “seems solid but is actually deceptive”—is based on “inappropriate measurement” and “distorted knowledge” while drawing “effort away from the things we really

care about” (pp. 3–4, 6). Indeed, as predicted by Alan Watts during the same era as Maslow’s (1969) article (Tunell, 2023), contemporary technocracy has boosted binary and linear ways of knowing at the expense of personal, embodied experiencing (Schneider, 2019) and of a systemic worldview (Capra & Luisi, 2014). It also promotes social conformity at the expense of spontaneity (Schneider, 2019).

Turkle (2011) noted that contemporary technology has left people “increasingly connected to each other but oddly more alone” (p. 19)—that is, disorientedly “lonely but fearful of intimacy” (p. 1) as well as the complexities of human partnerships and emotions. That culminates in a vicious cycle of being unable to disconnect and, by way of experiential avoidance, thus denying themselves the “rewards of solitude” (p. 3). Accordingly, “the inauthentic [has become the] new aesthetic” (p. 6). As dependency on devices makes tech-free encounters appear all the more “errant, alien, and wild” (Schneider, 2023, p. 20), we become enabled to “keep our uncomfortable conversations, as well as our inner thoughts, at bay” (p. 5). Consequently, today, capacities for empathy, curiosity, and tolerance of ambiguity and depth are dwindling and in danger of becoming atrophied. Tragically, up-and-coming generations “won’t know what they’ve never experienced—nor seen!” (Schneider, 2019, p. 10).

Whereas Starker (1989) accurately delineated a pattern in which, for centuries, older generations have tended to respond fearfully to the potential aversive impact of new media technologies for the up-and-coming generations, today, the situation is different insofar as that impact is already abundantly apparent. For example, comparable with Turkle and Schneider’s observations above, Twenge (2017) summarized the results of longitudinal studies from the early 1970s to the mid-2010s which found that, since the rollout of the Smartphone in 2011, various forms of adolescent social interaction and meaningful connection have steadily decreased while measurable loneliness and insomnia (attributable to fear of missing out) have concurrently and steadily increased. Overexposure to “snackable content” (Foe, 2017, p. 140) has compromised both attention span (Mills & Winerman, 2023) and sense of presence when encountering others (Turkle, 2011). Also, TikTok challenges have beget lethal destructiveness toward oneself—for example, ingesting laundry detergent (Chokshi, 2018) and self-asphyxiation (Sarkar, 2022)—as well as damaging effects for others, including school vandalism (Doubek, 2021) and auto theft, the latter of which has resulted in insurance carriers recently refusing to cover some Kia and Hyundai models due to their vulnerability to being hotwired (Hernandez, 2023). Since January 2023, several school districts across the United States have leveled lawsuits at social media companies for inciting measurable deteriorations in their

students' mental health (Prothero, 2023). Accordingly, the American Psychological Association (2023) recently published a *Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence* intended to “maximize the chances for balanced, safe, and meaningful social media use” (p. 8) via development of competencies, including information literacy, skills in conflict resolution and refraining from excessive social comparison, and recognition of content manipulation and xenophobic messages.

“With our guidance,” Carr (2014) warned, technocracy will “continue to find new ways to outperform us—to work faster, cheaper, better,<sup>5</sup>” resulting in compulsion “to adapt our own work, behavior, and skills to the capabilities and routines of the machines we depend on” (p. 41).

For example, Schneider (2019) noted the increasing neglect of longer-term, depth-oriented psychotherapy (including but not limited to humanistic therapies) in contemporary training programs despite the numerous existential threats and cravings for connection that mark our current zeitgeist for which those therapies are particularly well suited.

### *Technology and Authoritarianism*

Maslow (1969) also challenged,

One can always ask the criterion question: Would this [technology] be good for a Hitler or bad for a Hitler? A by-product of our technological advance is that it is quite possible and even probable that evil [individuals] are more dangerous, more a threat today than they ever have been before in human history simply because of the powers given to them by advanced technology. (p. 733)

Applying this statement to recent years, political writer Andy Borowitz (2022) observed that “by elevating candidates who can entertain over those who can think,” mass media have provided a bullhorn for “fact-free and nuance-intolerant . . . human soundbite machines,” which has resulted in reduction of “our most complex problems to binary oppositions: us versus communists; us versus terrorists; and, that latest crowd-pleaser, us versus scientists” (p. 6).

Indeed, deficient fulfillment of Maslowian basic needs often is associated with “the threat of chaos or of nihilism,” which can result in “easier acceptance of dictatorship or of military rule” (Maslow, 1987, p. 19; see also Bland & Swords, 2023; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Maslow, 1943). Although the “simplistic and expedient” solutions (Schneider, 2023, p. 22) offered by authoritarian and toxic leaders may provide temporary relief from basic anxiety, equally, they also currently pose threats to both democracy and well-being

worldwide. For example, a U.S. federal judge recently ruled that federal agencies may not communicate with social media companies about removal of erroneous public health information because doing so is a violation of free speech (Cole & Yurkevich, 2023).

## AI

AI scientists have recently articulated comparable arguments to Maslow's about the precarity of AI in the wrong hands in a late capitalistic society. Despite its ability to promote efficiency, productivity, and convenience in industries including health care, education, policing, finance, manufacturing, and transportation, AI also has far-reaching and potentially damaging implications for each of these industries/professions (White & Allman, 2023). Furthermore, Broussard (2023) advanced the concept of *technochauvinism*, the belief and sense of faith in computers' superior decision-making abilities—from facial recognition in policing to cancer detection in medicine—that is based on the assumption that these decisions must be neutral because they are based on unbiased algorithms. This overlooks the fact that those algorithms reproduce and amplify historical inequities based on the structural biases written into the code by the predominantly able-bodied, White, cis-gender, American men who develop it. Also, returning to climate change, the hidden environmental demands of AI should be considered. To illustrate, the hours required for training ChatGPT and subsequent cloud storage produces a carbon footprint comparable with that of a gas-powered car having driven over 1 million miles (Carino, 2023). And, as climate change continues, access to and competition for increasingly-scarce natural resources are likely to incite group conflict, war, and, with these, further xenophobia (Geronimus, 2023; Kendi, 2019).

Accordingly, in March 2023, industry executives, tech specialists, and academics signed an open letter calling for a half-year pause on the training of AI systems out of concern that the increasingly freewheeling race to develop and deploy the technology could have “potentially catastrophic effects on society” (Collier, 2023). Two months later, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman testified before U.S. Congress about AI risks and also developed another open letter, stating, “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war” (as cited in Meyer, 2023, para. 2). Furthermore, upon resigning from Google, AI pioneer Geoffrey Hinton warned that, in the absence of proper regulation and gatekeeping of AI, the average person may become “[unable] to know what is true anymore,” chatbots could plausibly replace the human workforce, and “killer robots” could materialize to wipe out competition between tech companies (Metz, 2023, para. 20).

For an illustration of Hinton's concern about the loss of truth that is directly related to this special feature, in April 2023, I queried ChatGPT about humanistic psychology. Part of the response said,

One of the key concepts in humanistic psychology is Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which proposes that human beings have a set of basic needs (such as food, shelter, and safety) that must be fulfilled before higher-level needs (such as self-actualization) can be pursued.

Though it is commonly presented in textbooks that Maslow's need hierarchy follows a linear, stage-like trajectory, with lower-level needs being utterly prerequisite for the higher-order ones, a careful examination of his (Maslow, 1987) original writings clarifies that this portrayal of his theorizing is not only oversimplified but inaccurate insofar as it does not account for the dynamic systems foundation upon which it is based<sup>6</sup> (see Bland, in press; Bland & DeRobertis, 2020a). Importantly, during an era in which reliance on AI platforms such as ChatGPT is replacing web research—let alone perusal of primary source texts—the spread of erroneous information is an ever-growing risk.

To Hinton's second point about chatbots taking over the workforce, Broussard (2023) emphasized that machine learning is a misnomer insofar as, in actuality, computers merely detect patterns in the data. For that reason, while she expressed optimism about AI as an assistant, she does not regard it as a suitable replacement for humans (Carino & Hughes, 2023) because it is unable to handle complexity, context, and other forms of tacit (vs. explicit) knowledge (Broussard, 2023; see also Carr, 2014) that also are vulnerable to endangerment as overreliance on automation grows.

Furthermore, during an era in which creativity has become replaced by curation (Questlove, 2018), musicians including Sting have questioned AI's ability to express emotions through music in a way that will move listeners (Savage, 2023). Comparably, Schneider (2023) casted doubt on AI's ability to handle life's paradoxes, like “the sliver of fear in a loving relationship, or the hint of sorrow in a moment of glee, or the taste of envy in most admiring friendships” (pp. 35–36). Accordingly, in a recent *JHP* article, Grant (2023) proposed that humanistic principles can “lend wisdom to the project of transhumanism” in an individualistic, capitalistic, materialistic society (p. 48).

## Limitations of Maslow

Despite his substantial insights and contributions, like all theorists, Maslow had his blind spots and therefore was not infallible. First, of particular note in his 1969 article was his challenge, “How shall we handle the fact that sadists,

perverts, masochists, homosexuals, neurotics, psychotics, suicidal make different choices than do ‘healthy human beings?’” (p. 729). In context, in his aforementioned remarks about I-Thou psychological science, Maslow had suggested engaging in direct encounters with these populations to co-create an *emic* perspective (versus operate via *a priori* and/or *etic* assumptions). On the other hand, Maslow’s pathologizing sexual diversity has been contradicted by subsequent research (see Boot-Haury’s article in this special feature) on the role of existential authenticity in expression (versus suppression) of one’s sexual/gender orientation as a facet of self-actualization. That said, for at least a decade, in its *Position Statement on Sexual- and Gender-Diverse People*, the Society for Humanistic Psychology has clarified,

Any statement suggesting that sexual- and gender-diverse people, when compared to cisgender heterosexual individuals, are not equally able to self-actualize and develop to their full potential as human beings stands contrary to the basic beliefs and values of humanistic psychology. (Society for Humanistic Psychology, 2023, para. 1)

Importantly, several authors in this special feature addressed Maslow’s comment.

Second, Smith (1973) decried Maslow’s exclusion of “people with gross pathology—the Dostoyevskys and Van Goghs” from his sample of self-actualizing people (p. 24). Although Maslow’s conceptualization of psychopathology generally reflects that of contemporary humanistic psychologists (see *JHP* Volume 59, Issue 5, 2019 and Volume 63, Issue 2, 2023)—that is, severe states may be understood as a normative response to severe worldly conditions—Maslow did not adequately acknowledge the potential for resilience and creativity therein.

Similarly, third, particularly in light of Maslow’s employment of binary terms like “good” (versus bad) and “superior” (versus inferior), over the years, his theorizing on self-actualization has been criticized for being predicated on two irreconcilable views of the self—one democratic, another elitist (for example, see Aron, 1977). “The underlying assumption is that if we all become better individuals through self-actualization, constructive changes in the structure of society will necessarily follow” (Prilleltensky, 1992, p. 320). However, as noted, self-actualization (SA) is seen as an impossibility for many people in that it is too irrelevant and/or out of reach (Daniels, 1988). Although Maslow made calls for steps toward social justice (E. Hoffman, 1999; A. Richards, personal communication, spring 2003), historically, follow-up by humanistic psychologists has been limited (L. Hoffman et al., 2015; Jackson, 2020). Thus, Maslow’s proposals have been inadequately

translated into social and political action—and, accordingly, the status quo it aims to overcome has been inadvertently upheld (Prilleltensky, 1992). Alternatively, Jackson (2020) suggested integrating humanistic theorizing with an intersectional lens to critically consider overlapping axes of identity as situated in multiple systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Moreover, in this special feature, several authors have called for a less hierarchical, more egalitarian, restructuring of Maslow's work.

Fourth, in discussing his anticipation that healthy individuals are likely to show superior intelligence, Maslow (1969) cited Louis Terman's "general finding . . . that children [who are] superior in intelligence were superior in everything else as well" and therefore that "all desirable traits in a human being correlate positively" (p. 725). On the contrary, according to Bar-On's (2001) research, compared to high emotional intelligence (which corresponds with the I-Thou aspects of Maslow's propositions in his 1969 article), strong intellect does not guarantee self-actualization. Furthermore, despite the numerous parallels among models of cognitive, affective, interpersonal, moral, and spiritual development, as noted by Wilber (2000) and congruent with my experience as a therapist, maturity in these domains tends to be uneven. Moreover, given the "uncomfortable eugenic ring" noted by one of the several authors who touched on that issue in this special feature, Terman's involvement in eugenics at Stanford University (Maldonado, 2019; Wasserman, 2018) is worth noting.

## **Overview of This Special Feature**

Following this introductory article, in "Maslow and the Good Person," Bill Compton reviews contemporary empirical studies that support Maslow's conceptualization of psychological health (self-actualization and self-transcendence) and facets thereof. Compton concludes that, generally, research findings have not further expanded these principles beyond what Maslow originally proposed, with one notable exception. As noted, today, Maslow's original conceptualization needs to be contextualized to better recognize the influence of social, cultural, and historical factors beyond mid-20th-century U.S. culture to which humanistic psychology began as a response and alternative to.

Second, in "And the Children Shall Lead: Abraham Maslow and the Adventure of Science," Eugene DeRobertis explores Maslow's proto-phenomenological assumptions about and vision for I-Thou psychological science that honors the roles of values and valuing, process, autonomy, and self-determination in psychological life as an alternative to I-it prediction, manipulation, and control.

From there, in “Biological Wisdom From Vertical and Horizontal Perspectives in Maslow’s ‘Toward a Humanistic Biology,’” Chris Henry calls for greater emphasis on the more inclusive and egalitarian aspects of psychological growth and health identified by Maslow to offset his overemphasis on its hierarchical ones.<sup>7</sup>

Next, in “Who is Included in Maslow’s Good Society?” Jared Boot-Haury first identifies contemporary examples of I-Thou science called for by Maslow (and celebrated by DeRobertis) that aim to promote a healthy society and reduce inequities. Then, following Henry’s calling for horizontalization, Boot-Haury critiques Maslow’s stance on sexual diversity and suggests that sexually diverse individuals’ self-expression qualifies as a form of self-actualization. Dylan Oseas extends that argumentation in “Transcending the Limitations of Abraham Maslow” by grappling with, from the vantage point of his lived experience, the contradiction between Maslow’s dedication to growth and social justice and his pathologizing sexual diversity. Then, in “Maslow’s Views on Technology and Culture: A Millennial’s Response to ‘Toward a Humanistic Biology,’” Courtney Cabell engages in critical dialogue with Maslow’s assumptions about the banes of technocracy from a millennial standpoint. She also reviews research on cultural variations of self-actualization called for by Compton.

Henry’s general calling for horizontalization and the specific illustrations provided by Boot-Haury, Oseas, and Cabell are brought full circle in Brent Robbins’s “Getting a Grip on Normativity: A Phenomenological Response to Maslow’s Call for a ‘Humanistic Biology.’” After critiquing the “uncomfortable eugenic ring” in Maslow’s call for superior people, Robbins suggests an existential-phenomenological reboot of normativity in psychology that accounts for the contextual significance of each person’s life-world experience as situated in the sociocultural context of their perceptual habits and which, thus, honors their “dignified irreplaceability” and their ability to answer to their own existence and to the claims of love that draw them forward through life’s ongoing struggles.

Next, in “Toward a Meta-Psychological Methodology: Reflections on Maslow and the Role of Experiencing and Perspective in Scientific Methods,” Heidi Levitt further explores the dialectic between Maslow’s hierarchical stance and his protesting oppressive forces. Then, similar to Robbins, she reinterprets Maslow by way of advancements in humanistic theorizing and methods, this time from a critical multicultural and qualitative lens. She suggests positionality and systemic privilege in psychological research, as well as experiencing as a method for critical science, in the interest of alerting psychological scientists to “new possibilities, conditions, or arrangements worthy of further exploration.”



Thereafter, Xu Jinsheng's "Humanistic Psychology, Daoism, and TongXin" examines the accuracy of Maslow's (as well as Rogers') understanding of Daoist principles from a Chinese perspective. He suggests areas in which humanistic theorizing and therapeutic application can become further enhanced by integrating additional Daoist principles that the founding humanistic psychologists omitted. Then, in "New Light on Maslow's Discovery of Daoism: A Reaction Paper," Maslow biographer Ed Hoffman provides an account of the origins of Maslow's interest in Daoism. This addresses points made by Xu Jinsheng about the limitations of Maslow's familiarity in light of the resources he had available at the time as well as the comparative strengths of his and Rogers's respective understandings.

Continuing the cultural thread while also starting the home stretch, in "Abraham Maslow as a Jewish Prophet," Ilene Serlin dialogues with Maslow's quasi-eugenic argumentation (à la Robbins and Levitt) and with his stances on the wisdom of the body, on science, on the relationship between unfulfilled needs and psychopathology, and on the relevance of Maslow's cautionary statements about technology today. Finally, in "Cat's Cradle and the Threads of Maslow's Humanistic Meditation," Donna Rockwell voices a call to action to employ longtermism<sup>8</sup> and the courage to live out an I-Thou way of being in an I-it world. She concludes the special feature with a note of wise hope suggesting mindfulness as an antidote to polarization and complacency in the face of the concerns Maslow articulated about an I-it society.

## Conclusion

Maslow's foci on cultivating the courage to live an I-Thou way of being in an I-it world and on unfolding awareness of interdependent self-in-relation and social processes that promote versus inhibit that sensitivity are crucial today as humanity collectively faces and negotiates numerous global-scale existential threats along with social justice issues and the implications thereof. They serve as an antidote to, on one hand, anthropocene antihumanism (fatalistic "rejection of humanity's traditional role as Earth's protagonist" based on the belief that "our self-destruction is now inevitable, and . . . we should welcome it as a sentence we have justly passed on ourselves") and transhumanism (glorification of scientific and technological progress rooted in belief that "the only way forward for humanity is to create new forms of intelligent life that will no longer be *Homo sapiens*"; Kirsch, 2023, p. 60). Of course, in the end, science and technology in and of themselves are not inherently problematic. Rather, it is the attitude by which they emerge and are embraced and employed that matters. Maslow's (1969) article starkly reminds us to ask ourselves how we choose to implement them, moment by moment.

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## Notes

1. Note that the page numbers throughout this special feature refer to the original *American Psychologist* article (Volume 24, Issue 8, pp. 724–735), which is available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0027859>
2. In this article, I employ “humanistic psychology” to refer not only to the Third Force but also existential, transpersonal, and constructivist psychologies (see Bland & DeRobertis, 2020b).
3. This reflects Nameche's (1961) call for synthesis of *caring* and *cold* (logical) *cognitions* in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (JHP; see also DeRobertis, 2021).
4. See also Carr (2014).
5. An allusion to the maxim, “Fast, cheap, good. Pick two.”
6. Maslow (1987) emphasized that fulfillment of the basic needs is not a discontinuous, lockstep progression but, rather, an ongoing holistic process:

[The statement that] if one need is satisfied, then another emerges . . . might give the false impression that a need must be satisfied 100% before the next need emerges. . . . A more realistic description . . . would be in terms of decreasing percentages of satisfaction as we go up the hierarchy of prepotency . . . The emergence [of a new need] is *not a sudden, saltatory phenomenon* [emphasis added], but rather a gradual emergence by slow degrees. (pp. 27–28)

Thus, Rowan (1999) used the analogy of Russian nesting dolls to illustrate the idea that the lower needs are transcended but also included within the higher ones—that is, they are never renounced, just less pressing.

7. To that end, characteristics of self-actualization have been empirically demonstrated in homeless individuals, attributable to efficacy in survival (Sumerlin & Bundrick, 2000).
8. MacAskill (2022) defined *longtermism* as “the idea that positively influencing the long-term future is a key moral priority of our time” (p. 4).

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