

# Essay 1.7

## Wanting to Feel Effective in Our Goal Pursuits for Both Outcomes and Process

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What is motivation? Historically, people have tended to think about motivation in two different ways. Some people, including psychodynamic (e.g., Freud, 1915/1957), Gestalt (e.g., Lewin et al., 1944), and behaviorist (e.g., Hull, 1943) scholars, have described motivation as a kind of universal energy that produces an experience of tension that can only be released by attaining one's goals. Others have argued that motivation involves the conflicting tendencies to approach desirable outcomes and avoid undesirable ones (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998). While these proposals clearly have merit, we suggest that they fail to capture fully how motivation works. For instance, the "all-purpose" energy described in the first definition does not account for the variety of unique motivational orientations that people can have. Additionally, because the approach-avoidance definition is grounded in approach or avoidance movement, it fails to capture motives that precede taking action, such as carefully monitoring and evaluating a given situation to find the truth about it. As a result, while these two common definitions may be useful, they are also limited.

### Motivation as "Preferences That Direct Choices"

In contrast with these proposals, we suggest that to be motivated is to have preferences that direct our thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Higgins, 2012). These preferences all relate to our desire to feel effective in our life pursuits. This definition differs fundamentally from the two perspectives described above because it proposes that the experience of effectiveness is not limited to whether or not a person attains or avoids specific *outcomes*. Instead, it proposes that people also want to feel effective within their *process* of goal pursuit, regardless of whether they have achieved the outcomes of interest. Although process-related motivation has received less attention from motivation scientists than has outcome motivation, common aphorisms reveal its importance: "It's about the journey, not the destination," "It's not about whether you win or lose, but how you play the game."

Importantly, outcome and process motivation can be further subdivided into three different domains within which people want to feel effective: *value*, *control*, and *truth*. Preferences in the domain of *value* relate to the *outcomes* that people want to effectively attain or avoid. In contrast, preferences in the domains of *control* and *truth* relate to experiences of effectiveness within the goal pursuit *process*. In the following sections, we review in more detail these motivational preferences and the choices they direct.

## Motivation to Feel Effective in Attaining Goal Pursuit Outcomes

### Value

The first motivational domain in which people want to feel effective is *value*. People feel effective in the domain of value when they have desired results and do *not* have *undesired* results. Given this focus on wanted and unwanted outcomes, value motivation works similarly to the approach–avoidance definition of motivation. Value is the kind of motivation captured within many well-established motivational theories. For example, *drive theories* propose that people are motivated by critical biological outcomes like the satisfaction of hunger and thirst (e.g., Hull, 1943), and *attachment theories* posit that people are motivated to attain important social outcomes like secure attachment (e.g., Bowlby, 1969).

*Regulatory focus theory* (Higgins, 1997) provides insight into the different kinds of value that are relevant to people with different motivational concerns. This theory suggests that all people possess two distinct systems that are rooted in different sets of basic needs. The *promotion system* is grounded in needs for nurturance and growth; as a result, people with a promotion focus are most motivated to attain positive outcomes (i.e., gains) and avoid outcomes that are not positive (i.e., non-gains). Promotion-focused people aim to move away from their current status quo in order to advance themselves toward a better state. In contrast, the *prevention system* is grounded in needs for safety and security; as a result, people with a prevention focus are most motivated to avoid negative outcomes (i.e., losses) and attain outcomes that are not negative (i.e., non-losses). Prevention-focused people aim to carefully secure their current status quo in order to make sure that they do not end up in a worse state. A person's current regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention) is a changeable state, and situations can lead a person to temporarily have a promotion focus (e.g., situations relating to one's ideals, hopes, and aspirations) or a prevention focus (e.g., situations relating to one's duties, obligations, or responsibilities). Additionally, while some people may tend to be more strongly motivated by one system or the other, these individual differences are most accurately conceptualized as chronically accessible states rather than as unchanging traits.

In addition to these regulatory focus-specific outcome preferences, people motivated by the promotion versus prevention systems prefer to use different kinds of strategic means to pursue their goals (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). Promotion-focused individuals prefer eager strategies, such as enthusiastically approaching a potential gain. They think, “Go for the goal!” Prevention-focused individuals prefer vigilant strategies, such as cautiously avoiding any threats to their satisfactory status quo. They think, “Be careful not to let this slip away!” Given these connections between motivation and *how* people pursue their goals, let us turn next to the two fundamental motives most closely associated with the goal pursuit *process*.

### Motivation to Feel Effective in the Goal Pursuit Process

As briefly mentioned above, although outcomes are certainly motivating, by no means are they the *only* motivating aspect of goal pursuit (or even the most important aspect!). Beyond whether or not people attain desired outcomes, they also want to feel effective in the process of goal pursuit. This process involves two different fundamental motives that work together in an integrated manner: *control* and *truth*.

#### Control

People feel effective in the domain of *control* when they manage to make things happen by effecting change in the process of their goal pursuit. Control-oriented motives relate to locomotion (Kruglanski et al., 2000) as well as to competence and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000), to name a few. Each of these dimensions of control captures a particular aspect of how people take effective action to either produce a change in the world around them or actively prevent such a change from occurring.

#### Truth

In contrast to control motivation’s concern with action and change, *truth* motivation relates more closely to knowledge and understanding. People feel effective in the domain of truth when they establish what is real and right in their process of goal pursuit. Among the three fundamental motives proposed by Higgins, truth motivation has received relatively less attention by psychologists. With this said, research has examined some dimensions of truth motivation, including the needs for cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957) and closure (Kruglanski, 1989) and the motivational orientation of assessment (Kruglanski et al., 2000). Furthermore, Higgins (2019a) has proposed that the human tendency to create shared realities—that is, to experience that one shares with others feelings, beliefs, or concerns about something—is fundamentally related to truth motivation.

## Motives Working Together

The three motives described above—value, control, and truth—*work together* in an integrated manner to drive goal selection and pursuit. For instance, while value motivation may define the desired outcome toward which a person will strive, truth and control must work hand in hand to guide and drive the process. Such a process is well-captured by control process theories of motivation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998). By engaging in truth-oriented activities, people identify potential goals or means, evaluate them, determine which they will pursue, and create a plan for how they will pursue them. Control-oriented activities are involved in implementing the series of actions outlined in this plan, and truth-oriented monitoring processes determine the effectiveness of the action and provide feedback on the right next step. Through this recursive process of thinking (truth) and doing (control), people make their way toward the desired (value) outcome.

Furthermore, beyond working together as separate motives, several lines of research reveal that value, control, and truth are also integrated more deeply. First, research on regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000) indicates that when people pursue their goals in a manner that aligns with their motivational orientation (e.g., as briefly mentioned above, using eager strategies with a promotion focus and vigilant strategies with a prevention focus), this state of fit makes their goal pursuits feel more “right” and affects their evaluations of the value of the desired outcome, their enjoyment of the process, and even their performance. Second, recent work reveals that the promotion and prevention systems of value motivation are associated with distinct control- and truth-oriented activities in the process of goal pursuit (Nakkawita & Higgins, 2021). People with a promotion focus are more motivated to expand what they know through exploration, discovery, and brainstorming (truth) and to take actions that involve movement and change (control). In contrast, people with a prevention focus are more motivated to refine and validate what they know through scrutiny and verification (truth) and to take actions that protect and preserve their satisfactory status quo (control). Finally, research examining motive integration indicates that when people’s value, control, and truth motives work together in a balanced manner, they experience a state of motivational harmony that is associated with heightened well-being (Cornwell et al., 2019).

This work on motive integration suggests that value, control, and truth each play a critical role in effective goal pursuit. It also raises important follow-up questions. Is each of these motives equally important in this process? Or might one of these motives be the *most* important? We suggest that truth motivation is the most important of the three (Higgins, 2019b). Truth is fundamental to human effectiveness because it is not possible effectively make things happen (control) or attain desired results (value) without first establishing what is real and right. Although it has not received much attention in the psychological literature explicitly, truth motivates everyday psychological processes like categorization, expectancy, and shared reality.

To conclude, we would like to share an allegory that captures several aspects of our proposal. As originally proposed by Cornwell and colleagues (2020), Plato's (380 BCE/1995) allegory of the chariot describes the three aspects comprising a well-ordered soul. This allegory involves a charioteer and two winged horses, each of which represents an aspect of the soul and, as Cornwell et al. (2020) propose, a fundamental motive. The first horse is driven only by human desire (value), whereas the second horse is well-ordered, proceeding ever forward (control). Acting on their own, the behavior of these two horses is chaotic; however, with the foresight and guidance of the charioteer (truth), the group is able to proceed toward "the heaven beyond the heavens."

This allegory reflects our perspective on motivation in several ways. First, it highlights that the ultimate goal of the team is to be *effective* in their pursuits—that is, to collectively advance in the right direction. Second, it reveals that each motive plays an integral role in such pursuits. Without the drive of the horse representing value, the steady movement of the horse representing control, or the thoughtful guidance of the charioteer representing truth, the system breaks down. Only when each motive is operating effectively, both on its own and in its interrelations with the others, can harmony be achieved. Third, and finally, this proper balance can only be achieved when truth—the charioteer—reigns supreme.