

Column 3: Exploring Mysteries of Living: Examples and Styles



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Why these Columns? Because human behavior causes global problems, and solving these problems requires changes in human behavior... So *everyone* benefits from knowing something about the natural science of human behavior (called behaviorology) that these columns relate. Having first appeared as newspaper columns, these columns began appearing on **BehaviorInfo.com** starting in 2020.

While some available books follow a reference-laced reporting of research results, these columns rely on a conceptual treatment of topics. This treatment includes numerous everyday examples, directly emphasizing meaningful understanding and appreciation of the fundamental principles, practices, and implications of the science that studies behavior.

As we reach and cover more complex, advanced topics, we will also employ our findings to explore and explain some of the conceptually intricate and intriguing questions that have challenged human intellectuality and emotionality since ancient times. At such points I suspect you will agree that we can now begin scientifically to answer some of humanity's ancient questions.

Two considerations recur across these columns. These concern my examples and writing style. In early columns, or with basic principles and processes, simple human behaviors as well as an occasional non-human behavior provides the examples best illustrating some particular point, because behaviorology concerns all behavior. However, the realistic explanation of ordinary, which really means complex, human behavior remains our primary emphasis as we get into later columns.

The particular difficulty with normal human-behavior examples centers on their inevitable complexity. Every realistic example contains numerous factors and effects. Many of these also interact with each other. While an example illustrates one or another concept or point, these other factors and effects continue to demand explanation as well. To meet such demands, we would have to expand each example into a whole book, which would get me into trouble with the publisher.

While such books are available, these columns satisfy best with the patience of going without answers until satisfactory ones take a turn in the telling. This also avoids

oversimplified examples that easily mislead, examples which might falsely imply that our principles and concepts only work in limited areas such as human abnormal behavior or circus–animal training.

Many normal examples, for instance, include some aspect of language, that is, verbal behavior. But that is not itself the point, and so it is left out. We gradually build the complexity toward some coverage of advanced topics, like language. Then, like the event snapshot that opened a previous column, you can later return to earlier examples and provide the rest of the story.

Regarding writing style, you may have noticed a need to get used to the style in these columns. The style is not designed to be hard on readers, but it is designed to avoid, or at least reduce, some linguistic characteristics that can make understanding behavior science more difficult.

In some ways our language is currently hurting its users, just as procreation, for perhaps the first time in human history, is hurting humanity. While that topic basically concerns overpopulation making many global problems worse, it remains for a later column. Right now, let's look at the linguistic concerns.

Comprehending the present writing style compels us to review a little about the rise of language. Language is verbal behavior, and it is a function of the same kinds of variables that produce all other behavior. One major class of variables that controls the kinds of phrasings we use in English stems from the pre–scientific agential viewpoint that reasonably existed at the time of the origin of language. Then, primitive animism was the most parsimonious view.

Primitive animism explained movements as the result of inner spirits animating both organic and inorganic objects, such as animals and rocks and wind and water and clouds. As languages evolved they often retained the certain economy of words that agentialism coincidentally enables without reference to its shrinking accuracy.

Thus today our language is laced with agential references, with personal pronouns as likely the most common. To say “I” or “you” or “he” or “she” is automatically to imply an inner agent of one or another variety, like a mind or psyche or self or soul or person. Thus, stylistically, here we try to engage phrasings that lack, or at least reduce, those pronouns. The result, however, while scientifically more accurate, may sound stilted, a result with which I hope you will be patient. Experience shows that increased exposure to phrasings that support scientific realities reduces the discomfort they may otherwise cause.

A similar problem confronts us over the use of active voice (for example, Joe earned money) and passive voice (for example, money was earned *by Joe*). Active voice, due to its direct subject–predicate–object structure, enhances clarity and readability, which accounts for its preference among authors, editors, and publishers. But look more closely. Active–voice structure often implies agency. Whatever is in the subject slot comprises the agent of the action.

Passive voice avoids that problem but at the high cost of reducing readability and clarity. In spite of these problems, some scientific disciplines expect their authors to rely on passive voice to avoid the action agents. In technical papers, the action agents usually

only appear in the authorship line.

Stylistically, in these columns we will continue to rely on active voice, but with fewer pronoun subjects than might occur in ordinary phrasing. Instead, words for other things or events or processes will serve better as sentence subjects, like in this sentence.

That is, for example, the last sentence could read, in ordinary but anti–science agential phrasing, "Instead, I will make words for other things or events or processes serve better as sentence subjects." But no "I" magical inner agent exists to do the making. At best the "I" is scientifically understood as a verbal shortcut. And not using it is even better.

In time, the increased quality of science and its products that may derive from recognizing and dealing with agential issues, including personal pronouns and active voice, will likely affect the way we regularly speak and write. We may come to exhibit more and more verbal behavior that, consistent with scientific reality, lacks inner–agent connotations. We may even gradually become more and more comfortable, individually and culturally, with this development.

Meanwhile, when particular topics lead us to need more explicit scientific accuracy, some of the phrasings in these columns may seem distorted to you due to the strength, only gradually reducing, of our lifelong agency–based verbal conditioning. Perhaps a new grammar is on the rise.

One book that follows some reference–laced reporting of research results is my 2014 book, *Running Out of Time—Introducing Behaviorology to Help Solve Global Problems* that BehaveTech Publishing, in Ottawa, Canada, published. This is a comprehensive, appropriately jargon–laced textbook. You can find it fully described on the books page of www.behaviorology.org.

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