

Column 72: Exploring Mysteries of Living: Behavior Passivity and Where to Next



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A Los Alamos member of The International Behaviorology Institute

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.

Before finishing these columns, we should more explicitly visit a principle that we have handled mostly implicitly thus far. This is the principle of *behavior passivity*.

Behavior passivity refers to the nature of behavior, all behavior, including all human behavior, of any type *or level of complexity*. Like all real events in nature, on this planet, in this universe, behavior is natural, that is, it comprises natural events. It is an inevitable reaction.

Operant behaviors as well as respondent behaviors are all reactions to variables in contingencies. As such, behavior merely “happens.” It happens as a function of other also real variables. When those variables happen, as a result of their own traceable natural functional history, behavior follows. If a behavior happens, then it had to happen. Conversely, if a behavior does not happen, then it could not have happened.

Various authors (for example, Skinner) have made that same point in similar ways in different disciplines. Whatever we “really” are, *we still are* when we acknowledge this reality. Whatever we “really” are *does not change* when we acknowledge this reality.

As real events, behaviors participate in the accumulating natural functional history of yet other real events, some of which are also behavior. Due to stimulation, neural behavior happens mostly as the firing of brain neurons while neuro–muscular behavior happens as innervated muscle contractions making limbs, or other behaving organs, move in various ways.

Since, in an appropriate time frame, we cannot really separate the observing of behavior and the firing of neurons along with the muscle contractions, we describe the situation in terms of the physiology *mediating* the behavior. That explains *how* behavior occurs, while the independent variables in contingencies explain *why* behavior occurs.

“Physiology mediating behavior” provides a direct description of those events that excludes traditional, pre-scientific (yet still all too current in some quarters) mystical notions about the origins of behavior. Some of these excluded notions involve physiology somehow originating or spontaneously initiating behavior, which it does not.

Other excluded notions involve a wide range of physiologically independent self agents that the cultural-level, even educational, conditioning of some people has led them to see as responsible for behavior essentially in scientifically untraceable or untestable ways.

Those mystical notions can be as specific as the notions that the agent does the behavior or tells the body to do the behavior, or decides which behavior will occur, or chooses the next behavior. Alternatively, these notions can be as general as the terms mind or psyche or self or soul causing behavior. Yet no evidence can exist for an inner agent’s doing, telling, deciding, or choosing, due to the untestable mystical status of inner agents.

According to the evidence of our scientific experience with behavior over the last century (and our more general scientific experience over the last four centuries) all those mystical notions, specific or general, treat behavior as a magical event outside scientific reality.

But allowing any part of those mystical notions to surface in discussions about understanding, predicting, controlling, or interpreting behavior, which is of necessity our scientific agenda, greatly reduces the possibility of dealing with the behavior part of our world effectively.

That is because these pre-scientific, mystical notions stand in opposition to a century’s worth of experimental data from our so far successful natural behavior science and its contingency-engineering extensions, including its behavior-passivity foundation.

Remember, even the complex behavior that produced all these columns occurred, not magically or mysteriously or spontaneously, but as a function of independent variables in contingencies.

If we try to work outside behavior passivity, then we sacrifice our best chance to help each other, or to improve our world, successfully. Across some further columns, we could look at contingencies in the context of discovering more of the properties of complex behavior.

However, *at this point now*, I have covered essentially all the topics that I can cover in useful or meaningful columns *of the typical length* that has characterized this set of 72 columns. Useful and meaningful topics remain, of course, but each topic would require a column many times longer than these columns have typically been, because the topics are so much more complex.

One alternative would be to provide them in multiple but separate parts. As a reader, however, I have trouble keeping up with reading such partial columns. When they start happening, I stop reading, perhaps because the topic thread seems broken. You may not have any such difficulty. Nevertheless, for such reasons I have avoided multi-column sequences unless each connected column can still clearly stand on its own within the same length constraint.

But each column, in a set of stand-alone columns for further complex topics, would itself still be two or three times the typical length of the columns in this series. That means that the time has come for this series to finish. But other avenues to knowledge remain available to you

Here are some of the topics that require a more extended treatment than a typical-length column can handle (with resources for covering them mentioned before the end): neural and neuro-muscular behavior details, characteristics of verbal behavior analysis, and some initial scientific answers to a range of long-standing human questions.

The topics of ancient human questions that deserve scientific answers could start with the interconnected sequence of reinforcers, values, rights, ethics, and morals that we considered briefly in a previous column. Additional topics would include consciousness, personhood, life, death, and reality. A more recent question about which behaviorology can contribute pertains to robotics.

Other more complex concerns are also integral parts of behaviorology. These include laboratory methodology, practical methodology, experimental research, stimulus equivalence relations, elementary verbal behavior types and contingencies, the application of verbal behavior analysis in the teaching of non-native languages, and multi-level evolutions, among others.

As a typical example of what you can find in those topics, consider death, a topic that affects everyone. Here is a kind of abstract for this topic: Behaviorally we find that people can, and some would say should, improve the retention of human dignity during the dying process, especially for individuals, and their loved ones, among the increasing number of cases of extended terminal illnesses.

Part of doing that includes recognizing three different types of death: social death, person death, and body death. These three differ regarding the different contingencies that interact with effects on the dying and their loved ones.

Analyzing those contingencies leads to designing new dignity-enhancing cultural practices that help people, especially the terminally ill and their loved ones, deal with the modern complexities of dying that have risen from medical progress. The most thorough treatment of the details on this topic appears in the 2012 book by Lawrence Fraley, *Dignified Dying—A Behaviorological Thanatology*.

You can find more details about all the topics covered in these columns, and *some* of those just mentioned additional, more complex topics, in my 450-page, 2017 general-audience primer, *What Causes Human Behavior—Stars, Selves, or Contingencies?* It is easier to read, shorter, and with less technical jargon, than my 600-page, 2014 textbook, *Running Out of Time—Introducing Behaviorology to Help Solve Global Problems*.

That textbook, however, not only includes all the topics covered in these columns, and in ever better detail, but it also covers *all* of those additional, more complex topics mentioned above. Indeed, if you would prefer a doctoral-level textbook, you could turn to Lawrence Fraley's 1,600-page, three-course textbook from 2008, *General Behaviorology: The Natural Science of Human Behavior*.

The "Books" page at www.behaviorology.org provides descriptions of all of those books,

and many others, including the book that collects all these columns together, *Explaining Mysteries of Living*. Part II of this book provides some papers that support these columns, including topics such as lessons from experience developing behaviorology courses and programs, ten commandments of natural science, behavioral naturalism, and culturology.

My hope is that you have, and feel that you have, benefitted from this series of 72 columns. Even more benefits accrue from perusing the additional topics in the other resources, and taking the actions recommended in these columns. Thank you for your interest, and may our futures always get better.

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