

Personhood & Superstition

Part I

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[Presented here is the first of four related works. These works are (a) "The Nature of Personhood," (b) "More Implications of Misconstrued Personhood," (c) "Cultural Investment in Superstition," and (d) "Behavioral Engineering to Reduce Superstition." These four pieces are all excerpts from parts of "Person, Life, and Culture," a later chapter of the author's book, *General Behaviorology: The Natural Science of Human Behavior* (Fraley, in press). The relevance of these pieces to managing improvements in ongoing cultural concerns increases their interest to readers of this journal. The four pieces are presented, one or two at a time, in consecutive issues beginning with the Spring 2006 issue (Volume 9, Number 1).—Ed.]

The Nature of Personhood

In developing this section, let us cast it conveniently in the familiar language of the inferred environment. To begin, let us note that we distrust reports (even self-reports) of persons who we have reason to believe feel, hear, see, taste, or smell nothing relevant to an event, yet claim to be describing the reality of the event that presumably was not felt, heard, seen, tasted, nor smelled. If a person says credibly that "I sense *nothing*, yet I know what is happening," people tend to assign that report to the realm of intuition, speculation, conjecture, or assumption.¹

The distrust stems from the implicit absence, not only of simple awareness, but of recognition behaviors. That is, we intuitively accept that an experienced person, who *recognizes* an overturning car, may then behave an "un-

derstanding" that an automobile wreck is in progress (which is to comprehend what has been recognized merely as the disorientation of a car in relation to a roadway—a comprehension kind of response that is evoked by the recognition response), but we tend not to treat as equally reliable such "knowledge" on the part of a person whom we suppose could not have experienced any recognition behavior evoked by that car nor by changes in its relation to its environment. Absent such behavior, the reality of the car and its wreck remain unestablished. Thus, a report such as "the car that drove out of sight ten minutes ago is now wrecking," by a person who cannot be in current contact with that car is not regarded as an observation, although others may still treat that report as a credible assumption by the speaker.

Suppose that yesterday our speaker traveled that same road and discovered a dangerous situation that would probably cause an approaching car to wreck. When that speaker reports that "the car that drove out of sight ten minutes ago is now wrecking," let us suppose that the speaker is experiencing a vision of that car wrecking and is describing that imagined scene. In that case, the triggering energy that evokes the recognition and comprehension behavior is not entering the body via the ocular system. Instead the vision is being stimulated by energy from other neural activity in the brain. The person may have been behaving thoughts about that car before behaving a vision of it wrecking in which case we may say that those thoughts *chained* to the vision of the wreck, and we would conclude that the ultimate step in that preliminary thinking functioned evocatively to produce the vision of the wreck. The person, if appropriately manded, would perhaps report something like "I was thinking along other lines about that car when suddenly in my mind's eye I saw it wreck, although I was not actually there," or "as I was thinking about that car, its involvement in a certain kind of wreck came to me as a premonition."

The vision of the car wreck could also be evoked by external stimuli that need not be aspects of the car wreck. For instance, the vision of the car wreck may occur rather directly in response to another person's mand such as "What do you think is the current status of that car?"

¹ A description that is classed as a speculation or assumption may have a valid historical basis and represent a logical if hypothetical extrapolation of a sequence of past events with which the speaker had been in contact. Thus, in the absence of any current contact with a train, one may assert that "the train is approaching" if one is contacting a stimulus that has paired reliably with past contacts with trains (e.g., clock hands in a certain configuration). We distinguish between a *speculation* and a direct *report* on the basis of what currently is evoking it. A direct report of something features a tact of a sensation type of response

to an energy input from the environment. For example, if one behaves a vision of an approaching train in response to light energy impinging from without and then says "the train is approaching," that is classed as a direct report about the train (although it is more accurately a report about some neural behavior of the vision kind). However, if that same statement occurs as the functional culmination of some preceding private and chaining neural behavior, perhaps with its origin unspecified, that statement is deemed to be speculative or conjectural.

When parts of the brain are engaged in awareness, recognition, and comprehension reactions to aspects of what we call a behavior-controlling environment (whether the functional stimuli are external or internal to the body), it is incorrect to assume that *one's knowing that those neural reactions are happening consists of the detection of those kinds of private neural behavior by a somewhat autonomous person*. That sequence of private neural behaviors already *is* the detection per se. The essence of the agent called "the person," who in that incorrect assumption would implicitly have to detect (i.e., respond to) the specified sequence of neural behaviors, has no existence apart from the ongoing awareness, recognition, comprehension, and subsequent classes of neural behavior. That is, a "person" has no essence beyond those classes of private neural behaving. "We" *are* those neural behaviors, and our personhood does not, and cannot, transcend them (although, parts of our bodies may functionally exhibit various kinds of further sequential responding to them).

The great mystery of personal existence posed in the simple question "what am I," which has preoccupied philosophers since antiquity, is resolved as a class of behavior (i.e., the neural kind) that is executed by parts of the nervous system. There is no further level of consideration to which the analysis can be carried logically. One part of the body, consisting of some nerves, behaves in response to other events. The phenomenon to which people refer as *consciousness* or *sentience* consists of functionally determined neural behavior. While that kind of behavior can chain forward in a functional sequence, no further aspect of a *person* lies beyond that general class of neural behavior to engage in its further appreciation from an independent perspective. If the stimulating events happen to be the behavior being exhibited by some other part of the body in relation to environmental controls, the secondary level of neural behaving (behaving in that special neural way in response to the ongoing environment-behavior relations involving other parts of the body), is called *self-awareness*.

Those neural behaviors that collectively are called *consciousness*, *sentience*, or *thinking* (as these terms are most broadly construed) represent the end point in the definition of *person*. That is, those kinds of behavior are not mere *symptoms* of a body-managing self-agent in action. Such neural behavior *is* the most intrinsic level of a person's manifestation. That neural behavior, rather than implying the person, *is* the person.

Because such person-defining neural behavior occurs intermittently with changes in the capacity of the body to exhibit it and in response to the changes in the energy that stimulates it, a "person" manifests intermittently and with variance in magnitude. The *life* of a body is defined biologically, but a *person* is defined behaviorally.

The quality of personhood manifests as behavioral process, and thus waxes and wanes. When that kind of

neural behaving first begins to manifest within a body, that is the *person* coming into existence (i.e., the waxing of a person). A permanent cessation of that kind of private neural behaving marks the final termination of the person (i.e., person death as opposed to body death).

Insofar as a person is merely a class of behavior and all behavior occurs reactively, there can be nothing proactive (in the initiative sense) about a person. That is, the manifestation of a person is purely reactive, as is *all* behavior. This is the nature of a person, and that is why we say that persons do not *do* things, but instead merely *happen* (reactively). [In the author's book, in the chapter titled *Consciousness*, which came just before the chapter from which this piece was excerpted, the author had provided a wealth of detail elaborating this perspective.—Ed.]

The fact that *persons* (as opposed to live bodies) are purely behavioral in nature has certain noteworthy implications that have been addressed earlier and that we now review: First, one's personness manifests as ongoing behavioral processes and not as a body-managing or agential entity, ethereal or corporeal. Second, the person-defining behavioral phenomena manifest only as reactions to environmental stimuli.

A further implication of the purely behavioral nature of a person is that the termination of a person occurs merely as the cessation of certain kinds of behavioral processes. Thus, a body (a) that is maintaining enough physiological function to be regarded as still alive, and (b) that formerly mediated a person, can thus be outlasting in a physiological way the person whom it previously mediated. If such a body eventually regains the physiological capacity to mediate some of the former neural behavior that was the person, aspects of the former person may then manifest.

The previously developed definition of a person has pertained only to neural behavior. By that definition, the swing of an arm that throws a ball would not be a part of the person. Rather, the ongoing neural behaviors of consciousness that are functionally related to that arm swing would represent the person. If a realistic mannequin, which naive observers would mistake for that individual, executed a very similar throw of that same ball, perhaps in response to some internal computer programming, those who know that it is a mannequin would not regard it as the person whose throw it mimics. The previously developed definition of a person, in relying on private neural behavior, has an intrinsic or internalized quality as does the traditional notion of the somewhat autonomous self-agent. It is this internalized definition of *person* that prevails when a dying individual who has stopped exhibiting outwardly evident behavior is surrounded by concerned people one of whom may ask "Is he (or she) still there?" The question alludes to the dying individual's private neural behaviors of consciousness.

Another common definition of person broadens the previous definition to include the publicly evident operant behavior that a given body mediates. For example, a given *person* can be defined as the abstract total of *all* of the operant behavior that a particular body has ever produced (i.e., the total exhibited operant behavioral repertoire). This definition comports with the historical person insofar as it pertains only after the individual is behaviorally dead and alludes to all of the operant behavior that the body exhibited during its entire biological life. Alternatively, a living *person* can be defined as the behavioral repertoire that the host body is currently capable of mediating given the appropriate stimulation. This more narrow definition excludes all past behavior that, for whatever reason, is no longer possible, and any future behavior for which the necessary conditioning has not yet occurred. Still another common definition of a person pertains to the behavior that is presently occurring. Thus, what we could call the *current person* would be the operant behavior that that body is now mediating, a concept that supports remarks such as “stop being a spoiled brat and be a nice person for a change” or “this is more like the gracious person that you can sometimes be.”

Respondent behavior can be included in the previous definitions of a person, but it may be excluded or at least de-emphasized, especially the unconditioned kinds such as knee jerks, eye blinks, and salivation, which play little or no role in our discriminative responding to different persons. We are more likely to take conditioned respondent behaviors into account when defining personhood, for example an individual's conditioned emotional reactions to certain classes of events.

Note that the *person*, which manifests as behavior, is thus a process that is mediated by a live body. Therefore, a person can never be alive in a physiological sense. Instead, the person consists of concerted behavior that *happens* as behavior-capable body parts respond to innervation. To remain behavior-capable those parts must remain biologically alive, a state in which they can remain prepared to exhibit the behavior that defines the person.

Although behavior is process, all process has a physical basis in the sense that process happens to structure. Thus, the capacities to behave in particular ways inhere in conditioned and unconditioned neural microstructures that respectively can be activated only by specific kinds of energy inputs from the entirely natural behavior-controlling environment. Person-defining behavior is a kind of process that specifically reflects the microstructural entities that undergo that kind of neural activation. Those microstructures thus represent a kind of program (in the software sense) for the particular behaviors that, by occurring, cumulatively constitute a particular person.

The self-initiation of behavior, in the sense of a spontaneous moment of creative origination of behavior by some

kind of resident self-agent, remains a grand fallacy. No such proactive self lurks within a body to act as an agent of origination for behavior. Linguistic attributions aside, “I” do not initiatively *do* anything, and neither do “you” or “they,” because person-defining behavior happens automatically given the impingement of the appropriately innervational energy on an appropriate neural microstructure.

If that energy happens to be arriving from a source that consisted of a preceding neural behavioral event, that source event also will have occurred naturally and therefore cannot be characterized accurately in agential terms. Thus, a statement such as *I made myself see a kangaroo in my mind's eye by deliberately thinking over and over to myself the word “kangaroo”* refers both to real and fictitious events. The behavior of repeating the word is evoked by whatever events define the initially inadequate contingency to visualize that animal. When that repetitive subvocal behavior occurs, its evocative capacity supplements that of the stimuli featured in the originally insufficient contingency, and their combined evocative capacity is above the evocative threshold for the occurrence of the image, which is then behaved. On the occasion of a simple functional analysis the “I”-agent always evaporates in a wisp of redundancy.

Our environments often place us under contingencies not only to behave in some relevant way but also to provide a public account for that behaving. However, any explanation that circumvents functional relations represents invalid analytical shortcutting. But as long as accounts for behavior rely almost universally on invalid alternatives to the prevailing functional relations, such invalid explanations by an individual tend to carry no adverse qualitative implications that manifest via the socio-cultural reactions of others.

Progressively, however, that is slowly changing with respect to explanatory reliance on mystical self-agents. Especially with the emergence of behaviorology, the natural science perspective on behavior has produced a valid alternative that manifests in the behavior of the growing number of people whose conditioning insures it. Like other widespread but invalid ideas that had to await an overtake by the leading edge of scientific progress, the notion of the body-managing self-agent is drifting from a safe anchorage in the harbor of social security to a potential implication of intellectual deficiency. The human predilection for that kind of hindrance to intellectuality almost always connotes inadequate or misguided education but arguably may also be a propensity with biological roots. In any case, as the natural science of behavior advances on this front, *de rigueur* implications of personal reliance on spirits in accounting for behavior become less fashionable, especially in contexts that do not impose a contingency to assuage the conservative biases of those who remain invested in such superstitions.

Explanatory recourse to a fictitious body-driving agent can now indicate (a) an educational history that has left one unprepared to exhibit the objective alternative, (b) a deficient intellectual capacity that inhibits the conditioning of the appropriate analytical behavior, or (c) a personal investment in the implications of that fallacy that is too large to jeopardize. Such an investment may include the exploitation of opportunities to profit in some way by continuing to promote such an invalid idea.

The invocation of a behavior-originating agent establishes, albeit fictitiously, a recipient for blame or praise. Thus, the assumptive error of investing the body with a self-agent quickly compounds to the false notion of personal responsibility, which, in turn, justifies recourse both to attempted adulation of the putative self for good management and to attempted punishment of the putative self for what is construed to be errant management. Thus, the invalid concept of an intrinsically good or evil person continues as the perpetuated legacy of an ancient analytical error.²

In reality, the behavior of an individual, including the many kinds that define the person *per se*, is being controlled (in the functional sense) by the environment. Upon occurring, a behavioral response may prove either to be irrelevant, effective, or ineffective with respect to its consequences. With respect to social control, when we are confronted with irrelevant behavior, we can recondition the body to behave in different and potentially effective ways in the presence of the subject matter. Confronted with what to us seems like effective behavior, we can reinforce it sufficiently to maintain or increase its manifestations on similar occasions. Confronted with relevant but ineffective behavior, we can recondition the body to exhibit more effective forms of the behavior in the presence of the subject matter, typically through a standard shaping procedure.

In cases of irrelevant or ineffective behavior, we also can prevent the unreconditioned body from continuing to behave in those ways through either of two approaches. First, we can arrange a preclusion procedure that separates the body from the subject matter of concern (i.e., from the stimuli that produce such behavior). That prevents the pertinent energy transfer from environment to the behaving body parts, thus precluding the subsequent behavior that would have been controlled in that way. If the separation from the subject matter is maintained across a sufficiently long interval, the re-

sponse-capable body part (a dynamic system) will be undergoing a series of naturally occurring decapacitating structural alterations in what is called the *forgetting process*. Second, without engaging in practices of behavioral reconditioning, we can intervene in other ways that diminish or eliminate the capacity of the body to exhibit that behavior even though the behavior-triggering energy from the environment continues to impinge on the body. Options include the use of drugs, surgery, bondage, or the induction of sleep, coma, fatigue, or satiation.

Thus, the “I,” “me,” or “you” to which we so often refer does not exist as an agential entity. Instead the referent of those pronouns *happens* through a reactive behavioral process. The phrase “*whole person*” is not a reference to the whole body that behaves but rather to the repertoire of behavior that the body has been conditioned to exhibit under various circumstances plus the currently available behavior that for genetic reasons it was innately structured to exhibit on appropriate occasions.

Thus, the essence of a *person* manifests in behavioral *process*, not as an identifiable entity. *One* happens (behaviorally), but *one* does not have ontological status as some kind of entity regardless of the common practice of superstitiously conjuring spirits that are conceptually installed to serve as such entities. When Rene Descartes uttered his famous non sequitur, “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore, I am”), the “sum” did not connote a body-managing entity, substantive or ethereal. The “cogito” was not evidence of “sum” as Decartes alleged but instead *was* the “sum.” With respect to the ontic status of “person,” to think is to *happen* but not to *be*.

Getting that simple distinction wrong has been an easy mistake down through the history of humankind, and that error has given rise to the many organized efforts to specify the nature of the putative self-entity and to endow it with properties that, not surprisingly, accommodate the predilections of the endowers. Because no such entity can be found through objective methods, whenever its presence would be convenient such an entity must be conjured, and it is usually cast in ethereal form, which discourages objective attempts to detect it.

Sociocultural Implications of a Misconstrued Personhood

Many of the world’s religions are constructed around reliance on such an erroneous construct of personhood, as are other contemporary cultural agencies such as government, law, and education, which tend to be based largely on secular versions of that fundamental fallacy. A scientific basic discipline has arisen to engage in the objective pursuit of the implications of that mystical basic fallacy without challenging the intrinsic mysticism of that foundation. Most followers of that discipline strictly adhere to scientific methods and on that basis lay claim to the kind

² While no self-agent exists to be responsible, we still speak of responsibility in the sense that behavior produces consequences: Praise as a potential reinforcer, and blame as a potential punisher, remain among the consequences which may then make the kinds of behaviors that produce them more or less likely to occur (Editor’s footnote).

of prestige earned by modern natural scientists, but they do so in the absence of a quality-controlling philosophy of naturalism. Thus arises the issue of what merit should accrue to the application of good scientific practice to answer the kinds of questions that tend to arise through an indulgence in superstitiously informed assumptions.

Currently, that kind of scientific foundation underlies many applied curricula in behavior related fields. Consider education, for example. Many people lament the failure of the schools to teach effectively while those same people continue, devotedly, to support an education establishment in which teacher training programs are based almost entirely upon a superstitious view of human beings and their behavior—a view that is widely entertained throughout the general population. A modern educator, so trained, begins the teaching task from a fundamentally mystical perspective on the nature of human beings and their behavior. Given that the evidence of effective teaching is change in the behavior of the student, and that the point of teaching is to produce that kind of outcome, teachers whose training results in their misconstruing the nature of the variables upon which their work must focus approach their job with a training-constructed disadvantage.

Although much is expected of such mistrained teachers, even their limited successes are remarkable. Money that is allocated to solve the problem of poor teaching

typically insures that such misguided training occurs on a grander scale, with a broader scope, and with an even more thorough capacity for the indoctrination of new teachers with the popular behavior-related fallacies.

Most of the actual progress posted by contemporary teachers can be attributed to natural contingencies that compel some effective teaching behavior at a practical level in spite of a professional verbal repertoire much of which is divorced from reality. We do not expect our next generation of aircraft to be designed by persons whose training curriculum substituted superstitious nonsense about physical systems for the fundamentals of mechanical and aerospace engineering. Yet people have continued to expect improved teaching from educators whose training curriculum is based on superstitious fundamental notions that are substituted for valid concepts of behavior-controlling functions. Fallacious alternatives to functional analyses, no matter how scientifically they may be pursued, only by accident affect the variables that functionally determine the outcomes that people are under contingencies to produce...✻

References

- Fraley, L.E. (in press). *General Behaviorology: The Natural Science of Human Behavior*. Canton, NY: ABCs.✻