ON EXPLAINING BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT: Field and Hineline (2008) offer a sympathetic explanation for the resistance of psychologists and philosophers to explaining behavior as temporally organized phenomena occurring as a function of other events, also often distributed over time. This resistance is supported by the contingencies maintained by the everyday verbal community that make dispositioning the default causal attribution for English speakers. Temporal organization of events is hard to “see,” and the linearly organized verbal responses that describe such organization cannot model it. Whereas multiple scales of spatially extended phenomena can be pictured to aid in understanding (as seen, for example, on the “Powers of Ten” website: http://powersof10.com/), pictures of events occurring at multiple time scales are schematics at best. The analysis provided by Field and Hineline helps make sense of the difficulties inherent in explaining behaving.

Key words: explanation, temporal organization, attribution, multiple scales

Dispositioning and the Obscured Roles of Time in Psychological Explanations (Field & Hineline, 2008) is the remarkable product of two long-extended patterns of behavior, one cut short by the tragic death of Doug Field. The near-perfect integration of these patterns was evident even in early drafts, and Phil Hineline’s continuing and completing the work represents a case study in a temporally extended, multi-scaled, behavioral process. The end product is a combination of broad scholarship and deep understanding presented in tightly reasoned, elegant, thought-provoking prose.

As Field and Hineline noted, humans find it hard to “see” temporal organization, and the linearly organized verbal responses that describe such organization cannot model it. Whereas multiple scales of spatially extended phenomena can be pictured to aid in understanding (as seen, for example, on the “Powers of Ten” website: http://powersof10.com/), pictures of events occurring at multiple time scales are schematics at best. In their article, Field and Hineline move across temporal scales of events from the level of the linguistic practices of verbal communities extending over hundreds of years to the level of individual instances of behavior exemplified by word choices in scholarly articles.

The various scales at which these phenomena play out involve multiple scientific levels of analysis. They include phenomena occurring in both cultural and behavioral domains, and within each of those domains brief local events play

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roles in extended patterns of distributed events. As Field and Hineline point out, scientific understanding of these phenomena is hindered by the limitations of direct perception as well as by the verbal practices of the larger community of speakers and listeners that gave rise to modern science. A great impediment to understanding temporal organization of behavior/environment relations is that both our perceiving and our verbal practices encourage what the authors call dispositioning—attributing behavior to internal and inherent characteristics of organisms. Even scientists who demonstrate experimentally the misattributing of situational causes of behavior to reified internal causes themselves attribute such behavioral propensity to internal and inherent characteristics of human organisms. Field and Hineline provide example after example in which researchers have fallen into the same verbal trap that they have spent so much time elucidating in the behavior of others. The authors explain this behavior of researchers and their subjects while deftly, and sometimes gingerly, avoiding that trap.

The contingencies maintained by the everyday verbal community have made dispositioning the default causal attribution for English speakers. Although not all verbal communities are as prone as our own (the authors draw on Whorf for counterexamples), most of them have agent/action syntax, and due to the everyday experience of contiguous causation, the action is attributed to the agent, hence the dispositioning propensity. But why is this syntax so prevalent? At the level of direct observation, concrete objects have a special kind of reality in our experience. The writer and the book are solid and lastingly present, but the writing that results in the book is distributed over time and its parts intermingled in a behavior stream with parts of all sorts of other activities. The writer and the book are clearly real; the writing is ephemeral. But if we observers who learn to talk about writers, writing, and books were the size of atoms, and/or if we observed over eons rather than minutes (or even decades), we might directly perceive that the writer and the book are also events distributed in space and time across multiple scales. All is event.

Field and Hineline offer a sympathetic explanation for the resistance of psychologists and philosophers to explaining behavior as a function of other events distributed over time. Even behavior analysts, whose stock in trade is events as subject matter, find it difficult to retain a focus on events rather than things. Consider how often, even in the professional literature, behaving is not followed by food deliveries, but by food, and how often the organism, rather than the behavior, is reinforced. Event as subject or object in an English sentence is awkward, if not downright perverse. The analysis provided by Field and Hineline helps make sense of the difficulties inherent in explaining behaving.

References