STEPPING DOWN TO THE FOUNDATIONS IS NEEDED TO REMEDY CONCEPTUAL CONFUSION: A FINAL REPLY TO O’HORA AND BARNES-HOLMES

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O’Hora and Barnes-Holmes (2001), in their second response, ground some of their claims about the lack of clarity of my position in a very questionable practice, quoting parts of my statements out of context. Even though, it seems that my main argument was not understood: “rules” are not stimuli, and instructions cannot be equated to rules, even when social rules are most of the time formulated in such a way that become mandatory or admonitory: “do this” or “don’t do this,” and “if you do this or you don’t do this then. . . .” Instructions seem to be verbal devices specially suited to facilitate or induce particular kinds of performances and, in this regard, they fit as examples of the application of admonitory social rules.

Instructions have been mistakenly identified as rules in and by themselves because they have been assumed to “specify or refer to contingencies.” Nevertheless, instructions, as verbal devices, acquire their function as verbal stimuli when, and only when, a particular performance is prompted in their presence and some kind of consequence follows the performance. Instructions become verbal stimuli because of their correlation with behavior and its consequences. Instructions have no relation at all to the problem of reference, unless O’Hora and Barnes-Holmes assume that instructions are functional because they “inform” or “transmit information” about events and their properties. If this were the case, I would just point to the suspicious similarity of this assumption and the traditional conceptions of reference in which words are representations of things.

It is a relief to know that O’Hora and Barnes-Holmes agree with me that current concepts and theoretical assumptions seem to need some changes in order to capture the complexity of human behavioral phenomena. However, it seems that we do not agree regarding the best way to do it. Adding relational frame theory and equivalence-class stimulus relations to the operant-based distinction of rule-governed and contingency-shaped behavior may not be the soundest strategy. I make this assertion based upon the inherent conceptual and logical limitations and contradictions of operant-based theory and very specially in relation to language

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behavior as was analyzed by Skinner (1957; see Ribes, 1999, for a discussion of this fundamental problem).

References


This debate is now closed.