

## **Bio-Psychological Perspective on Life and Death**

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The convoluted practices with which we now cope with death often seem to be adrift in the swirling currents of ancient folklore. Many traditional practices implicitly accept the horror and agony that nature carelessly visits on terminally ill people. Behaviourology, a strictly natural science, affords a new perspective on death and dying and supports a relevant Behaviour technology. But that approach is unfamiliar, and people must have an opportunity to adjust to it if they are to understand and accept it.

Life is a process or function, not an entity having ontological status, and the functional relations definitive of life occur among real physical entities. When the process stops completely, in all of its varieties and manifestations, the status of the system thereby changes from “living” to “dead.” Evidence for life is manifested in physical events, mostly in the class called movements, but from this perspective nothing actually lives in the traditional spiritual or mystical sense. Not even living organisms are alive in that way. Hypothetical constructs such as human spirits, souls, ghosts, and autonomous internal selves are construed as fictional entities that have been invented to support spurious explanations of life in the absence of a natural science of organic bodies and their interactions with their environments. In most of these convenient explanations, Behaviour is simplistically attributed to the exercised will of the invented mystical agent (of whatever name), and that conjured spirit-agent is always magically endowed with exactly those powers that would be necessary to produce whatever Behaviour is observed. Life is a process. Therefore, life happens, but it does not exist as an entity; it can stop and start, but it cannot come and go. Life consists of various dynamic relations in and among body parts, which in carbon-based organisms, through the accidents of natural history on this planet, are essential for the maintenance of the whole Behaviour-mediating organism. Behaviour consists of a set of innervated functional relations between the organism and elements of its environment. Both life and Behaviour are naturally occurring functions in all respects.

From the perspective of the natural sciences, the concept of person is best construed as a concept of Behaviour, not of body. A body only mediates the behaviour that we call a person. A person is a Behavioural repertoire—a unique set of operant and respondent Behaviours conditioned during a lifetime, plus a few unconditioned respondents capacitated as an inherited genetic endowment. Bodies, as opposed to persons, are said to die when certain internal physical and chemical relations, critical to body maintenance, break down. Because some of the operant and respondent Behaviour that defines the person is also indirectly necessary to the maintenance of the body, a cessation of the person usually produces a delayed breakdown in the internal life functions of the body.

The whole dying process is sequential and in some cases can be slow paced across both the Behavioural cessation and the subsequent body disorganization. The operant Behaviour of a person can stop while some respondents and nearly all of the internal physiological functions continue. The individual thus exists in a comatose condition, but the Behavioural events that define the person are no longer occurring. Sudden death is largely irrelevant to the concerns of this article. Usually unexpected, it is often accidental. Bodies that still exhibit worthwhile behavioural repertoires are suddenly disorganized. All Behaviour stops abruptly, which is total person-death. As a preventative measure, substantial resources are typically expended at the cultural level on programs of accident and crime prevention. Sometimes, however, under contingencies of negative reinforcement, the opposite is true: Programs of abrupt elimination are undertaken because the cost-benefit ratio for persons in some group or class has dropped below certain standards. Typical examples include war at the group level and criminal executions at the individual level. But in cases of sudden death, whether deemed good or bad, the focus of intervention is on events other than the dying per se, which may last only minutes, seconds, or less. The important issues in quick dying pertain either to prevention or to developing the means for more efficient dispatch, as the case may be. The Behaviour of a dying person becomes important only in cases of prolonged dying. In that case, a need exists for programs of Behaviour management as all parties respond to the long sequence of mostly aversive events.

The kind of scientific and philosophical foundations upon which people base their practices for coping with the dying process substantially affect their practices.

This article applies the philosophy and science of Behaviourology to the interpretation of the events associated with death and dying, redefining terms, and describing new concepts that emerge from the analysis. Upon this new foundation new perspectives and practices can be constructed, and it is to facilitate such an exploration of the behavioural approaches to the issues of death and dying that this work is dedicated.