September 12, 2019

Passages from “Language, Rules, and Behavior” (1949)

My purpose in writing this essay is to explore from the standpoint of what might be called a philosophically oriented behavioristic psychology the procedures by which we evaluate actions as right or wrong, arguments as valid and invalid and cognitive claims as well or ill grounded. More specifically, our frame of reference will be the psychology of rule-regulated behavor…

I shall attempt to map a true *via media*... between rationalistic a-priorism and what… I shall call **"descriptivism,"** by which I understand the claim that all meaningful concepts and problems belong to the empirical or descriptive sciences, including the sciences of human behavior.

"How can one assert the existence of concepts and problems which do not belong to empirical science, without admitting the existence of a domain of non-empirical objects or qualities together with a mental apparatus of acts and intuitions for cognizing them?"

Notice that our suspicious pragmatist did not say
"The concepts and problems of mathematics belong to naturalistic psychology."
If he had, he clearly would be formulating a descriptivistic philosophy of mathematics. What he actually said was
"... there is no aspect of *mathematical inquiry as a mode of human behavior* which requires a departure from the categories of naturalistic psychology for its interpretation."
With this latter statement I am in full agreement. It must by no means be confused with the former.

But if I do not accuse the pragmatist of being a descriptivist as a matter of principle, I do contend that pragmatism has been characterized by a descriptivistic bias.

[S]hall we say that psychology deals with some but not all of the properties exhibited by psychological processes? And if not with all, then what distinguishes the properties with which it does deal from those with which it does not?

As I see it, an inventory of the basic qualities and relations exemplified by this universe of ours, and, in particular, by the mental processes of human beings, would no more include obligatoriness than it would include either logical or physical (that is, "real") connections.

To make the ethical "ought" into even the second cousin of the "hurrah" of a football fan is completely to miss its significance. If I have become more and more happy of late about Kant's assimilation of the ethical "ought" to the logical and physical "musts," it is because I have increasingly been led to assimilate the logical and physical "musts" to the ethical "ought."

Shall we say, then, that one does not justify a *proposition*, but the *assertion* of a proposition? -- that one does not justify a *principle*, but the *acceptance* of a principle? Shall we say that all justification is, in a sense which takes into account the dispositional as well as the occurrent, a *justifcatio actionis*? I am strongly inclined to think that this is the case.

I should be inclined to say that the use Jones will make of instances is rather of the nature of Socratic method. For Socratic method serves the purpose of making explicit the rules we have adopted for thought and action, and I shall be interpreting our judgments to the effect that A causally necessitates B as the expression of a rule governing our use of the terms "A" and "B." (ftnt 2)

[We] must distinguish between action which merely *conforms to* a rule, and action which occurs *because of* a rule. A rule isn't functioning as a rule unless it is in some sense internal to action. Otherwise it is a mere generalization.

Yet above the foundation of man's learned responses to environmental stimuli -- let us call this his *tied behavior* -- there towers a superstructure of more or less developed systems of rule-regulated symbol activity wrhich constitutes man's intellectual vision.

To say that man is a rational animal, is to say that man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*. When God created Adam, he whispered in his ear, "In all contexts of action you will recognize rules, if only the rule to grope for rules to recognize. When you cease to recognize rules, you will walk on four feet."

The mode of existence of a rule is as a generalization written in flesh and blood, or nerve and sinew, rather than in pen and ink.

A rule, on the other hand, finds its expression either in what are classified as non-declarative grammatical forms, or else in declarative sentences with certain special terms such as "correct," "proper," "right," etc., serving to distinguish them, from generalizations. What do these special features in the formulation of rules indicate? They give expression to the fact that a rule is an embodied generalization which to speak loosely but suggestively, tends to make itself true.

It is only by absorbing the insights of rationalism that a pragmatic empiricism can do justice to the facts.

[W]here the *regulist* speaks of statements which exhibit the rules of the language in which they are formulated, the *rationalist* speaks of intuition or self-evidence. The regulist goes from object-language up to meta-linguistic rule, whereas the rationalist goes from object-language down to extra-linguistic reality. The regulist explains the significance of the word "must," as it occurs in arguments, in terms of the syntactical rules of the language in which it occurs; the rationalist explains it in terms of a non-linguistic grasp of a necessary connection between features of reality.

[A]s children we learn to understand the noise "blue" in much the same way as the dog learns to understand the noise "bone," but we leave the dog behind in that the noise "blue" also comes to function for us in a system of rule-regulated symbol activity, and it is a *word*, a linguistic fact, a rule-regulated symbol only in so far as it-functions in this linguistic system.

To think of a system of qualities and relations is, I shall argue, to use symbols governed by a system of rules which, we might say, implicitly define these symbols by giving them a specific task to perform in the linguistic economy. The linguistic meaning of a word is entirely constituted by the rules of its use.

The reader is quite correct in predicting that we shall take the former course and grant that the rules are themselves rule-governed. He is, however, mistaken in inferring that this "regress" is vicious. It would be vicious if the infinity of rules which an organism would have to learn in order to exhibit rule-governed behavior constituted an infinity of rules which differed in the full-blooded way in which the rules of chess differ from the rules of bridge. That the hierarchy of rules is in a certain sense repetitious (compare a rule for naming a name with a rule for naming the name of a name) provides the answer to this difficulty. However, even granting this, the regress would still be vicious if in order for a type of behavior to be rule-governed, every instance of the behavior must be accompanied (brought about) by an organic event of which the *text* (to use Bergmann's term) *is* the core-generalization of the rule. If this were the case, then, obviously, an infinite hierarchy of events with texts would have to occur in order for any case of rule-governed behavior to occur. (ftnt 5)

If there were such things as sense meaning rules (as opposed to verbal conditionings) how should they be formulated? Perhaps: "When I have such and such experiences, I am to use the expression 'I see red' "? Unfortunately, the philosophers who speak of sense meaning rules are the same *moderns* who insist that there is no such thing as cognition unmediated by symbols…In order for the rule to be intelligible, the person who is to obey it must already know when he sees red. But to know when he sees red he must, according to these same *moderni*, understand the meaning of either the symbol "red" or a synonym (which need not, of course, belong to any intersubjective language of *overt* utterance). In short, the very symbols whose possession of meaning is explained by these overly enthusiastic regulists in terms of sense meaning rules, must either already have meaning independently of the rules, or else the sole value of the rules is to serve as a means of acquiring synonyms for symbols which have meaning independently of the rules. This is but a sample of the confusion into which one gets by failing to distinguish the learning of tied symbol behavior from the learning of rule-regulated symbol activity.

The stress laid by many empiricists on "ostensive definition" is on the one hand a sound recognition of the patent fact that a meaningful language system must tie up with the environment, and on the other hand a sad confusion between learning the *definition* of a word, that is to say, learning to use it in a rule-regulated manner according to socially recognized rules, and learning (being conditioned) to respond with the word-noise to certain environmental

stimuli. This confusion is exhibited by the ambiguous usage of the phrase "ostensive definition." (ftnt. 6)

Action on a rule presupposes cognition, and if confusion leads these philosophers to conceive of all symbol behavior as in principle -- that is, parroting aside -- rule-regulated, then they are committed to the search for an extra-symbolic mode of cognition to serve as the tie between meaningful symbol behavior and the world. This link is usually found, even by regulists who have been decisively influenced by behaviorism, in a conception of the *cognitive given-ness of sense-data*.

Here we must pay our respects to John Dewey, who has so clearly seen that the conception of the cognitive given-ness of sense-data is both the last stand and the entering wedge of rationalism.

It is my purpose in the following pages to sketch a regulist account of real connections and of the "synthetic *a priori*" which preserves the insights of the rationalistic doctrine, while rejecting its absolutism as well as the pseudo-psychology of cognitive given-ness on which this absolutism is based.

Where Hume charged the rationalist (and before him, common sense) with projecting a subjective feeling of compulsion into the environment, we charge the rationalist with projecting the rules of his language into the non-linguistic world.

Our task is to give an account of the rules in terms of which, we have claimed, the causal modalities are to be understood.

The meaning of a linguistic symbol *as a linguistic symbol* is entirely constituted by the rules which regulate its use. The hook-up of a system of rule-regulated symbols with the world is not itself a rule-governed fact, but -- as we saw -- a matter of certain kinds of organic event playing two roles: (1) a role in the rule-governed linguistic system, and (2) a role in the structure of tied sign responses to environmental stimuli.

if the linguistic as such involves no hookup with the world, if it is -- to use a suggestive analogy -- a game played with symbols according to rules, then what constitutes the linguistic meaning of the factual, non-logical expressions of a language? The answer, in brief, is that the undefined factual terms of the language are *implicitly* defined by the conformation rules of the language.

[K]nowing a language is a knowing *how*; it is like knowing how to dance, or how to play bridge.

We have interpreted the notion of real connection in terms of the conformation rules of languages. We thus make real connections, so to speak, entirely immanent to thought. They are the shadows of rules.

Linguistically we always operate *within* a framework of *living* rules. To *talk about* rules is to move *outside* the talked-about rules *into* another framework of living rules. (The snake which sheds one skin lives within another.) In attempting to grasp rules *as rules* from without, we are

trying to have our cake and eat it. To *describe* rules is to describe the *skeletons* of rules. A rule is *lived*, not *described*. Thus, what we justify is never a rule, but behavior and dispositions to behave. The "ought" eludes us and we are left with "is." The skeletons of rules can be given a pragmatic or instrumentalist justification. This justification operates within a set of living rules. The death of one rule is the life of another. Even one and the same rule may be both living as *justificans* and dead as *justificandum*, as when we justify a rule of logic. Indeed, can the attempt to justify rules, from left to right, be anything but an exhibition of these rules from right to left? To learn new rules is to change one's mind.