

In Response

The ABP Contingency

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Vargas (1984) has proposed *postcedent* as the name for the final term in the three-term contingency, as a replacement for *consequence*. His rationale is that the new term is neutral, by which he appears to mean that it does not confuse operational consequences (arranged by an experimenter) and functional consequences (affecting behavior). But the issue is more complex. Consequences may only be functional, in which case we call them adventitious; they may only be operational, in which case we have no precise term, but something akin to "ineffective consequence" will do; and they may be both functional and operational, which is the most interpretable situation, and again we have no term.

Consequences also occur which are inevitable outcomes of the behavior performed. Feeling pressure on the nose is a consequence of balancing a ball, and such pressure controls the adjustments necessary to make a circus seal a skillful performer. This is in contrast to what we normally think of in terms of consequences—the arbitrary reinforcement of a seal's behavior with fish.¹ No doubt Vargas is mostly concerned with arbitrary reinforcers and not the necessary outcomes of behaviors which are their consequences.

Vargas's term appears most useful in keeping those of us interested in arbitrary consequences from confusing operation-

al and functional consequences. But it also seems to allow a huge amount of irrelevant material into behavior analysis. Any event that occurs after a behavior is its postcedent, and the three-term contingency ceases to be a contingency at all.

Behavior analysis is a process of determining whether and/or how operational contingencies become functional. The terms *antecedent* and *postcedent* underscore that the relationship between behavior and subsequent environmental events needs not be functional. In fact, most antecedent and consequent events are not functionally related to the behavior studied at the beginning of an experimental analysis, and the problem is to determine the development of functional control. As an heuristic, postcedent is a useful addition to the behavioral verbal repertoire, but I suspect that the term will not be widely used because operant psychologists are interested in consequences, not neutral temporal relations. Perhaps the word *antecedent* might be questioned as being too neutral (we are interested only in antecedents that elicit, discriminate, or establish behavior, not that just precede behavior). And, despite the pristine etymological background provided by Vargas for his new term, the ABP contingency (sic) lacks mnemonic value. While the operant baby may be a little cleaner, we may now have a lot of bathwater to contend with.

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¹ The example of the circus seal was stolen from a series of lectures given by C. B. Ferster during the 1977–1978 academic year.

REFERENCE

- Vargas, E. A. (1984). On terms: A new term and some old advice. *The Behavior Analyst*, 7, 67–69.