

# *An Essay on the Obvious*

William T. Powers January 1991  
Post to CSGnet

... I'm reminded of a lot of the "new physics" stuff that's been going around—The Emperor's New Mind, The Quantum Self, chaos in the brain, and so on. I'd like to say this about that:

## **AN ESSAY ON THE OBVIOUS**

I think that all attempts to apply abstract physical principles and advanced mathematical trickery to human behavior are aimed at solving a nonexistent problem. They all seem to be founded on the old idea that behavior is unpredictable, disorderly, mysterious, statistical, and mostly random. That idea has been sold by behavioral scientists to the rest of the scientific community as an excuse for their failure to find an adequate model that explains even the simplest of behaviors. As a result of buying this excuse, other scientists have spent a lot of time looking for generalizations that don't depend on orderliness in behavior; hence information theory, various other stochastic approaches, applications of thermodynamic principles, and the recent search for chaos and quantum phenomena in the workings of the brain. The general idea is that it is very hard to find any regularity or order in the behavior of organisms, so we must look beyond the obvious and search for hidden patterns and subtle principles.

But behavior IS orderly and it is orderly in obvious ways. It is orderly, however, in a way that conventional behavioral scientists have barely noticed. It is not orderly in the sense that the output forces generated by an organism follow regularly from sensory inputs or past experience. It is orderly in the sense that the CONSEQUENCES of those output forces are shaped by the organism into highly regular and reliably repeatable states and patterns. The Skinnerians came the closest to seeing this kind of order in their concept

of the "operant" but they failed to see how operant behavior works; they used the wrong model.

Because of a legacy of belief in the variability of behavior, scientists have ignored the obvious and tried to look beneath the surface irregularities for hidden regularities. But we can't develop a science of life by ignoring the obvious. The regular phenomena of behavior aren't to be found in subtleties that can be uncovered only by statistical analysis or encompassed only by grand generalizations. The pay dirt is right on the surface.

The simplest regularities are visible only if you know something about elementary physics—and apply it. Think of a person standing erect. This looks like "no behavior." But the erect position is an unstable equilibrium, because the whole skeleton is balancing on ball-and-socket joints piled up one above the other. There is a highly regular relationship between deviations from the vertical and the amount of muscle force being applied to the skeleton across each joint. There is nothing statistical, chaotic, or cyclical about the operation of the control systems that keep the body vertical. They simply keep it vertical.

The same is true of every other aspect of posture control and movement control, and all the controlled consequences of those kinds of control. Just watch an ice-skater going through the school figures in competition. Watch and listen to any instrumentalist or vocalist. Watch a ballet dancer. Watch a stock-car racer. Watch a diver coming off the 10-meter platform. Watch a programmer keying in a program.

It's true that when you see certain kinds of human activity, they seem disorganized. But that is only a matter of how much you know about the outcomes that are under control. The floor of a commodities exchange looks like complete disorder to a casual bystander, but each trader is sending and receiving

signals according to well-understood patterns and has a clear objective in mind—buy low, sell high. The confusion is all in the eye of the beholder. The beholder is bewitched by the interactions and fails to see the order in the individual actions. When you understand what the apparently chaotic gestures and shouts ACCOMPLISH for each participant, it all makes sense.

Of course we don't understand everything we see every person doing. It's easy to understand that a person is standing erect, but WHY is the person standing erect? What does that accomplish other than the result itself? We have to understand higher levels of organization to make sense of when the person stands erect and when not. We have to understand this particular person as operating under rules of military etiquette, for example, to know why this person is standing erect and another is sitting in a chair. But once we see that the erectness is being controlled as a means of preserving a higher-level form, also under control, we find order where we had seen something inexplicable. We see that an understanding of social ranking, as perceived by each person present, results in one person standing at attention while another sits at ease. Each person controls one contribution to the pattern that all perceive, in such a way as to preserve the higher-level pattern as each person desires to see it.

It seems reasonable that once we have understood the orderliness of simple acts and their immediate consequences, we should be able to go on and understand more general patterns that are preserved by the variations that remain unexplained. As we are exploring a very large and complex system, we can't expect to arrive at complete understanding just through grasping a few basic principles. We must make and test hypotheses. But if we are convinced that the right hypothesis will reveal a highly-ordered system, we will not stop until we have found it. If, on the other hand, we are convinced that such a search is futile, that chaos reigns, we will give up the moment there is the slightest difficulty and turn to statistics.

I claim that human behavior is understandable as the operation of a highly systematic and orderly system—at least up to a point. I say that it is the duty of any life scientist to find that orderliness at all discoverable levels of organization, and to keep looking for it despite all difficulties. We must explore all levels, not just the highest and not just the lowest; what we find at each level makes sense only in the context of the others.

We have a very long way to go in understanding the obvious before it will be appropriate to look for subtleties. I have no doubt that we will come across mysteries eventually, but I'm convinced that unless we first exhaust the possibilities of finding order and predictability in ordinary human behavior, we won't even recognize those mysteries when they stare us in the face. I don't think that anyone is prepared, now, to assimilate the astonishments that are in store for us once we have understood how all the levels of orderly control work in the human system.

We won't get anywhere by looking for shortcuts to the ultimate illuminations that await. Most of the esoteric phenomena of physics that are taught in school today were occurring in the 19th Century, as they always have. But who, in that century, would have recognized tunneling, or coherent radiation, or time dilatation, or shot noise? If we want to see a Second Foundation of the sciences of life, we have to begin where we are and build carefully for those who will follow us. If we succeed in trying to understand the obvious, the result will be to change what is obvious. As the nature of the obvious changes, so does science progress.