

Values as Leading Principles in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

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Abstract

In this paper the definition of values as verbally constructed global desired life consequences is examined. It agrees that values, or Leading Principles, are the products of arbitrarily applicable relational responding and holds that what is “global” about them is their ready availability across many circumstances. It holds that the “desired” are not so much desired as approved, and what is approved is not so much the consequences of a pursuit as the pursuit itself of which certain consequences, if they arrive, are simply a part. It suggests seeing psychological flexibility as being valuable only in so far as it is in the service of chosen values.

Keywords: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Relational Frame Theory (RFT), motive, arbitrarily applicable relational responding (AARR).

I begin by noting that in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes, *et. al.*, 1999) and the related theory of language, Relational Frame Theory (RFT) (Hayes, *et. al.*, 2001), there is no limit to what can serve as relata incorporated as part of arbitrarily applicable relational responding (AARR). Thus, private events such as bodily sensations are as much potential relata as are the sounds we call “words,” or the “objects” we call “trees” or “birds.” If I ask the reader to, “raise your arm mentally not physically,” and if the reader does so, then my request contains both the Contexts of Function (C_{func} 's) and the Contexts of Relation (C_{rel} 's) that have likely led to the reader having kinesthetic and possibly visual sensations of his/her arm raising even though no publicly observable gross arm movement occurred. Thus, the point to be made at the outset is that certain response functions, in this case private bodily sensations that are part and parcel of experiences we call “satisfaction” or “deprivation,” are no less potentially available relata for incorporation into relational networks than are any other “things” in the world.

This means that if we accept for the moment the definition of values offered by Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson in 1999 (p. 206), “[v]alues are verbally constructed global desired life consequences”, then some of the functions that could be present when these kinds of verbal constructions are present are functions of experiences which we name “satisfactions” and “deprivations.”

It is also worth noting that one of the basic notions of operant psychology is that organisms are already active. They do not need to be “motivated” to become active from what is normally a passive state. Rather, some actions become more or less probable so that what we call “motivation” is not what gets an organism going but what gets it going in a particular way. So called “motivation” changes the quality and perhaps the quantity of action. It does not create action in an otherwise inert organism.

Writing in 1932, and before B. F. Skinner's *Behavior of Organisms* (1938), John Dewey (1960) put it this way:

A motive is not then a drive to action, or something which moves to doing something. It is the movement of the self as a whole, a movement in which desire is integrated with an object so completely as to be chosen as a compelling end. The hungry person seeks food. We may say, if we please, that he is moved by hunger. But in fact hunger is only a name for the tendency to move toward the appropriation of food. To

create an entity out of this active relation of the self to objects, and then to treat this abstraction as if it were the cause of seeking food is sheer confusion. The case is no different when we say that a man is moved by kindness, or mercy, or cruelty, or malice. ... Benevolence or cruelty is not something which a man has, as he may have dollars in his pocket-book; it is something which he is; and since his being is active, these qualities are modes of activity, not forces which produce action. (p. 154)

We may say, if we please, that it is in this sense, that the “thing” that ACT calls “values” can be said to “give direction.” And, under the current definition, what is giving direction is a verbal construction, *i.e.* AARR in action.

I suggest that what we consider “global” about values ought not to be how frequently we do, in fact, desire certain outcomes, but how available what we are calling “values” are for directing action. Their “global-ness” lies in their virtually never-ending ability to provide direction, not in our virtually never-ending desire for certain life consequences. This is why I like to refer to that which is under discussion as “Leading Principles.” That phrase makes clear that they are available, as principles, to lead us through the wilderness of living with which each new life step puts us in contact. If we look backwards with regard to our living, we see a path. It is the one that our living made. But if we look forward, there is no path because no one has ever lived our life before. Leading Principles provide direction in that unknown which is the next moment of our lives, and the next, and the next.

Additionally, we want these Leading Principles to be chosen, rather than accepted as given. What I am about to say will not sound very ACT-like so I beg some indulgence. I do not see that the exercise “choosing” one fist or another is a very good example of CHOOSING (Hayes, *et. al.*, 1999, p. 213). It is, to me, a very good example to illustrate that we can act whether we have so-called “reasons” or not. As the text makes clear, such “choosing” is the sort of behavior available to any living organism. However, it is viewing an act in context, *i.e.* in relation to other aspects of living, which is the basis for really CHOOSING rather than just acting in the moment. It is the difference between doing something on purpose, and doing something on purpose with purpose. We can, on purpose, pick one fist or another, but what is the purpose of that “on purpose” act? Whatever we answer is not, if it functions, “just words,” nor is it, “the purpose.” Rather “the answer” that comes out of our mouth is a constituent of AARR and that activity also includes as relata what we might call non-arbitrary aspects of existence. And, all of that is funded in “values” or “Leading Principles” in action.

We get a sense of this sort of choosing when, in therapy, we move from, “What do you want?” to “What is important?” There is almost no end of concrete likes and enjoyments. Some preclude the enjoyment of others, and not just momentarily, while others may not. That I cannot enjoy both monogamous and polygamous relationships is not a matter of making appropriate schedules on Monday verses Tuesday. We can’t “important,” the verb, about everything. Important-ing about some things with our lives means other things are not done.

In any given moment, there may be a difference between that which we desire and that of which we approve. Said another way, there may be a difference between what we desire *in the moment* and what we desire *on reflection*. I am using the word “approve” to denote the latter because even when we do desire *on reflection*, we may not experience any of the bodily sensations we might normally predict with a word such as “desire.” Few individuals would desire *in the moment* to have the dental drilling that goes with having a cavity filled. Yet many would desire to have a cavity filled *on reflection*. Said another way, we see what is *wise* to do, whether we *want* to do it or not. Though I haven’t smoked cigarettes in a long time, I think I would like, or very soon would like, smoking cigarettes if I again started puffing on them. However, at a past time, I withdrew my approval of this like. I stopped “important-ing” about smoking cigarettes. Over time my desire has waned, but my approval ended long before my desire. I began a different kind of important-ing about cigarettes long before I stopped wanting to smoke them.

At the beginning of any life episode, what we like, or even approve of, is given, *i.e.* already present. However, it is not, necessarily, fixed. We can choose to give or withhold our approval for the first time or anew. In each new moment we can choose to “important” about one thing or about something else. And, our “mind” can help us make that choice to act with purpose on purpose. It is our mind, *i.e.* AARR, that allows us to situate our “likes” in the context of our *life* when the literal context of our life is only the context of the *moment*. AARR allows us to be literally “sorry” and “glad” about various potential life courses before we actually commit to them and to bring the past into the present moment in ways that do not happen without it. Further, AARR allows us also to be glad or sorry that we are glad or sorry. When I am sorry to have mistreated another if only in a slight way, I am “glad” that is my reaction. It is a sorrow of which I approve. And the opposite is just as true. When I watch television pictures of one partisan killing another and feel glad, I can feel sorry about that reaction. Gladness in the death of another member of the human family is a gladness of which I do not approve.

What is going to happen if I “important” about “something,” *e.g.* my children? The only thing I can say for certain is that I will have been important-ing about them. And, do I give my approval to that? It is because AARR can include functions of so called non-arbitrary aspects of existence that my approval can be grounded in more than “just a bunch of words” and yet is not independent of verbal processes.

I am not trying to suggest ACT can be aligned with the practice of living life out of one’s head. If anything, ACT is meant as an antidote to that malignancy. A vital life is a life worth living to the individual whose life it is, not simply one that “follows the rules.” And, as some friends of mine point out, anything worth doing is worth doing badly because it is worth doing in the first place. And, anything not worth doing is not worth doing well because it isn’t worth doing in the first place. The point is that there is a distinguishable difference between asking one’s self, “What in this moment do I most want to do?” and asking, “What in this moment do I most approve of doing?” “What is most important?” is, in my view, much closer to the second than the first. I can only act in this moment and with the constituents of this moment. However, AARR allows “seeing past the present moment” to be one constituent of the present moment. Such a constituent allows actions to be chosen in the present moment, with purpose and on purpose, *e.g.* with relevance to moments other than only the present one.

ACT, along with other approaches to living, encourages that we accept, *i.e.* that we willingly give our permission, for whatever is, has been, or may be. While we can willingly accept all, we cannot important, the verb, about all. Saying “yes” to some potential courses of actions is saying “no” to others. A constituent of the moment which functions as a guide for concrete action in any moment when responding to the question, “What in this moment do I most approve of doing?,” is what I am calling “Leading Principles.” These Leading Principles are no guide at all for, “What in this moment do I most want to do?” Indeed, the only real guide to the first question is a “gut check.”

I also do not mean to suggest that what I am calling Leading Principles operate as a cookbook for what action to take in any given situation. They do not. One may indeed step off with concrete action in a particular direction based mainly on nothing other than a “gut check” because that may all there is available. Insisting on more may often be just a stalling tactic that avoids “vital living” rather than merely “passing time.” However, the consequences of action may soon enough reveal if those steps are, in fact, moving one in the direction of which one has given one’s approval. Yet what is “approved” is not the consequences but the direction itself.

There is no “taking directions” in life without consequences of having done so. But the consequences, as in “verbally constructed global CONSEQUENCES,” only turn out to be constituents of Leading Principles as lived and not the “thing” of which we approve when we approve of this Leading Principle verses that one.

Leading Principles not only let us live our lives as best we can, an action done by any living organism. They allow us to TRY and live our lives as best we can. We are up to something. And, whether it “succeeds” or not, we have chosen to be up to that doing. AARR allows us to be up to something with purpose on purpose. What is forged in a Leading Principle is not the “mind being put in service of the heart.” It is that both the “mind” and “heart” are modified by each other so that action can “make sense” in the context of what is approved and what is approved can “make sense” in the context in which one finds himself or herself living. Further, what is idealized is not consequences but important-ing itself.

You can choose to go fishing but you can’t choose to catch fish. On the other hand, there is no fish catching without going fishing. And, if fish are caught, that catching is a function of having gone fishing in the first place and also becomes part of the experience we are calling “going fishing.” Would I “go fishing” if I knew ahead of time that there were no fish to catch? No, I would not because to know ahead of time that no fish can be caught is not to “go fishing” in the first place. Leading Principles are about a pursuit but not just about a pursuit. They include approving of that pursuit as well.

ACT aims to help individuals with AARR running them amok as AARR so often does to the vast majority of us. However, it seems to me that the process of forming Leading Principles just about requires that we find ways for AARR to be helpful because it is AARR that helps us persist when we distinctly don’t “feel like” doing so and, just as importantly, makes us feel more like doing so by reviewing them. “Why in the hell am I doing this in the first place? Oh yea, I remember. So let’s get going.” When actually functioning, those are not just a bunch of words. They are also augmentals.

In my view, Leading Principles are not dry abstractions, *i.e.* mere verbal constructions, nor are they “wet abstractions” because they represent desires that we always have. If these “desires” were always present, there would be no purpose for Leading Principles. The function of Leading Principles is to give direction. They can lead us no matter where we are in life. Functionally speaking, that is what they “are,” namely, direction-givers. Action that incorporates them may lead to actually finding water in the wilderness. It is the experience of finding that “Water of Life” that, in part, gives evidence to the “approvability” of one’s current set of Leading Principles. They are “working” because they produce actual fulfillments and, not only that, they produce actual fulfillments of which we approve. And that situation is experienced appetitively. These experiences can be further incorporated into relational networks that are part of Leading Principles and are part of the appetitive quality that is found in them because of the approved fulfillments encountered when the principles are enacted. In other words, because their direction can be said to “lead to something,” Leading Principles become just that much more capable of leading us in particular concrete situations. We have, as it were, concrete evidence of their working not just because in their presence we move in particular directions but because in that movement we encounter fulfillments of which we approve, *i.e.* ones that we call, “important.” AARR can put us out of touch with non-verbal ways of experiencing life. But it can also incorporate functions of experience that initially may not have been encountered verbally into relational networks that can be put in the service, rather than the detriment, of vital living.

To sum up, I am agreeing that values are the products of AARR, *i.e.* they are verbally constructed. What is “global” about them is their ready availability across many circumstances. The “desired” in “desired life consequences” are not so much desired as approved. And what is approved is not so much the consequences of a pursuit but the pursuit itself of which certain consequences, if they arrive, are simply parts. One might say Leading Principles are big time discriminative stimuli which we have both constructed and approved in order to occasion action of which we approve which is maintained by consequences of which we approve which further strengthens and maintains the discriminative stimuli we have constructed for just those purposes.

Let me conclude with one final suggestion. The central core of the ACT hexagon is typically labeled “psychological flexibility.” I do not see that this is correct. Because one of the six aspects of the hexagon

is “values,” there is a built in point to that psychological flexibility; namely its being incorporated by actualized Leading Principles chosen by the individual. I have said it that way to emphasize that psychological flexibility is not only a means by which values are actualized. They also provide limits on where that flexibility is applied. Additionally, that which is labeled “values” in the hexagon is one of the constituents of values lived or, said another way, Leading Principles in action. Yes, we want enough psychological flexibility that we not only can respond so as to build and maintain Leading Principles. And yes, we also want enough flexibility to maintain the potentiality to change those Leading Principles. Yet, we want enough psychological INFLEXIBILITY that we can remain firm and resolute when our immediate experience is aversive in response to our important-ing about whatever it is that we have chosen to important about. Thus, what the six combined components of the ACT hexagon do not give us psychological flexibility only, but psychological flexibility which is limited to and by its service to living values, or Leading Principles, moment to moment as life is actually lived.

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