

Three quarters to the left is one quarter to the right

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Positive and negative, left and right, true and false... We can buy knowledge with black and white contrasts, even though the 'truth' is often nuanced scattered in the landscape, the opposites of which are at most valid as axes in a coordinate system (dimensions). A tenet of behavioural change that almost every academic adheres to, is: don't name the bad behaviour but indicate how to perform the good behaviour. Three quarters to the left is one quarter to the right. However, being allowed to give instructions only in 'left' (or, conversely, only in 'right') often makes descriptions unnecessarily difficult.

An example. Speak of 'inclusion' (everyone can participate) instead of 'exclusion' (people must not exclude each other). But is inclusion the same as non-exclusion? If you are allowed to participate (inclusion) but have never been asked to dance, you are still excluded. Emphasizing equality (sexual orientation, gender, age, neurodiversity) rather than non-discrimination is also two different things. What if someone genuinely has different needs to stay healthy, to stay focused, or to have fun than most people in a group, isn't a treatment aimed at everyone in general that no one sees in particular a silent form of exclusion?

However, this does not answer the question why we want to label desirable ("positive") behaviour, even if we want to get rid of undesirable ("negative") behaviour. In the Ten Commandments (the Old Testament), naming negative behaviour was not yet taboo: Thou shalt not.... However, the New Testament came with 2 new rules, which do meet the modern desire to name the desired behaviour: Love your neighbour as yourself and God above all. While we should avoid absolutism, naming the undesirable is sometimes much clearer than taking the detour through desirable behaviour.

Perhaps the current rejection of "thou shalt not ..." can be linked to the twentieth-century success of behaviourism, which argued that people could be conditioned by rewarding desirable behaviour and punishing undesirable behaviour. It was found that rewarding 'accidental' desirable behaviours often has a stronger effect than punishing undesirable behaviours. If we now see that the planet has been endangered by an unbridled focus on and growth of technology, we should not talk about less technology (which seems to imply a form of condemnation/punishment), but, for example, more focus on connectedness (spirituality) and delay (laying technology aside more often). But I don't think there is anything wrong with both: and name the elephant in the room (in this example technology) and name desired alternatives (connect and slow down).

Behaviourism dominated academic psychology in America (and much of the rest of the world) for about 60 years, until Noam Chomsky brilliantly broke it down completely. Yes, negatively, he initially did not show how language behaviour could arise but showed that complex behaviour is underdetermined by the behaviourist mechanisms, which therefore don't offer a valid scientific explanation. While punishment and reward can play a role in behaviour, they by no means "explain" why we develop the way we do. Deci and Ryan already showed in the early 1970s that it is precisely external rewards that often stand in the way of intrinsic motivation. Like other animals, we are much more than the result of random behaviours programmed by punishment and reward.

The positive naming doctrine was followed up in positive psychology. Of course, with positive psychology I emphasize the great importance of (scientific) attention to positive aspects such as happiness, well-being and (mental) health. However, negative issues such as "disorders", depression, psychopathology, or "just" sadness and misery also deserve public and scientific attention.

In the transition to a sustainable world, we must transcend black-only or white-only thinking. We as humans do not have to be a plague. However, we must have the guts to also look at what we need to reduce or even stop! I stop with the doctrine of speaking only in (the often-non-transparent detours of) "positive" behaviour change. Connect, slow down and detech technology!