Behaviorism at room temperature

Until the cognitive revolution restored mental life to psychology, the pursuit of psychologists in this century had largely concerned the prediction and control of behavior. Prediction is a method by which scientists test hypotheses, so there in hardly much to argue with here if prediction is understood as method and not as goal. Control is the problem, though, and psychologists had sought to tally and weigh the observable properties of a creature’s world in search of the commodities that determined action. This conceptual framework led psychologists to describe an environment as an array of discrete stimuli, packets of energy that controlled discrete responses, and as the connections that bound them together through strengthening, or reinforcement. Skinner’s contribution to this scientific campaign was to offer a single account of control in the reinforcement of connections between stimuli and responses brought about by beneficial circumstances. Skinner was also great at offering a theoretical description of apparently complex patterns of action—playing tic tac toe, or ping-pong, or the piano—as a series of stimulus-response events.

In this assignment, take a commonplace action from your life—other than tic tac toe, ping-pong or playing the piano—and describe it in the terms of stimulus, response, and reinforcement. The article by Chomsky contains many examples of describing such quotidian events in the highly polished language of behaviorism.

If you can, include in your description a brief analysis of its truth or falsity.

Specific details. Write no more than 500 words on this topic. (These paragraphs contain 265 words.) Bring this little essay with you to class on February 5.