Behavioral Liquidity in Incomplete Symbolic Economies

A Coasean-Keynesian-Gödelian Framework for Behavior Science, Memetic Fields, and Rule-Governed Action

Josh Farrow

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Abstract

Behavior science explains action through antecedents, consequences, reinforcement histories, motivating operations, discriminative stimuli, rule-governed behavior, and contextual control. Yet human beings often fail to do what appears, from outside, to be the available or adaptive action. They may know what to do, want the result, possess the basic skill, and still fail to move. This paper proposes behavioral liquidity as a bridge construct: the field-dependent ease with which motive, intention, preference, or value can be converted into action. Behavioral liquidity rises when reinforcement value, future confidence, institutional support, identity coherence, and memetic meaning make an action path clear, credible, socially tolerable, and worthwhile. It falls when transaction costs, ambiguity, shame, social risk, institutional friction, rivalry, and low future confidence make action difficult to coordinate. The framework integrates six traditions: behavior science, Coasean transaction-cost economics, Keynesian expectation and confidence, Dawkins-style memetic transmission, Girardian mimetic desire, and a disciplined Gödelian analogy regarding incomplete self-referential rule systems. The resulting model treats human action as movement through incomplete symbolic economies in which rules, memes, institutions, and models reduce coordination costs while also producing new edge cases, loopholes, overcompressions, and reflexive responses. The paper argues that maladaptive behavior often persists not only because it is reinforcing, but because it is liquid; adaptive behavior often fails not because the person lacks motivation, but because the path from motive to action has become illiquid.

Keywords: behavioral liquidity; behavior science; transaction costs; Keynesian expectation; memetics; mimetic desire; rule-governed behavior; Gödelian incompleteness; institutional behavior; symbolic economies

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1. Introduction: The Problem of the Missing Action

A person says, 'I know what I need to do.' They may know they should exercise, make the call, submit the form, ask for help, leave the relationship, start the project, use the tool, tell the truth, stop the habit, follow the plan, or repair the conflict. Yet they do not act. The ordinary explanations are familiar: they lack motivation, they are avoidant, they are lazy, they are depressed, they are noncompliant, they are irrational, or they are choosing short-term reinforcement over long-term benefit. Some of these explanations sometimes fit. But they often miss the structure of the failure.

The person may have motivation but lack a liquid action path. They may value the result, understand the relevant rule, and even possess the component skill, but the conversion from intention to behavior may be blocked by hidden costs: uncertainty, shame, ambiguity, social threat, institutional burden, unclear rules, conflict between identities, conflicting models, low trust, low confidence that effort will matter, or a memetic field that makes the adaptive behavior feel humiliating, pointless, dangerous, disloyal, or incoherent.

This paper proposes behavioral liquidity as the missing construct. In financial language, liquidity refers to the ease with which an asset can be converted into usable purchasing power without major loss. In this behavioral framework, behavioral liquidity refers to the ease with which motive, intention, preference, or value can be converted into action within a given symbolic, institutional, and reinforcement field. A behavior is liquid when the action path is clear, the response effort is manageable, the social cost is tolerable, the future payoff feels credible, and the person can coordinate the action with the surrounding environment. A behavior is illiquid when the person may value it but cannot easily perform it because the path is too costly, ambiguous, shame-laden, institutionally obstructed, or future-poor.

This reframes many familiar clinical and social problems. A child may want help but be unable to ask for it. A parent may understand a behavior plan but be unable to implement it when exhausted. A worker may know that artificial intelligence matters but avoid using it because the novice identity is too threatening. A patient may understand medical advice but fail to coordinate the life system required to follow it. A citizen may want political change but experience civic action as futile. A student may know school matters but no longer believe effort converts into a meaningful future. These are not merely motivational deficits. They are liquidity failures.

The purpose of the paper is to build a field theory of such failures without abandoning the rigor of behavior science. The argument is not that reinforcement no longer matters. It matters profoundly. Rather, reinforcement operates inside symbolic and institutional fields that change what actions are available, costly, meaningful, shameful, rewarding, or credible. The organism is not merely choosing among behaviors; it is moving through a hyper-decision space in which each possible action has a different liquidity profile.

2. Behavioral Science and the Limits of Flat Choice Models

The behavioral starting point is selection by consequences. Skinner argued that selection by consequences operates at several levels: natural selection shapes species repertoires, operant conditioning shapes individual repertoires, and cultural practices are selected through consequences in social environments (Skinner, 1981). This selectionist view remains one of the strongest foundations for a scientific account of action. Behavior is not treated as an inexplicable inner eruption; it is treated as a pattern shaped by historical and current contingencies.

A simple behavioral expression might be written as $B_t = f(SD_t, MO_t, H_t, C_t)$, where B_t is behavior at time t, SD_t is the discriminative-stimulus context, MO_t is the motivating-operation context, H_t is reinforcement history, and C_t is the current consequence structure. This is useful because it asks the right questions: What occasioned the behavior? What has made it likely in the past? What consequence follows? What changes the value of that consequence? What environmental arrangement maintains the pattern?

However, human environments are not merely physical. They are symbolic, verbal, relational, institutional, and memetic. A discriminative stimulus may be a facial expression, but it may also be a diagnosis, a brand, a headline, a performance metric, a religious symbol, a political slogan, a social-media metric, or a phrase from childhood. A motivating operation may be hunger, but it may also be shame, status deprivation, uncertainty, humiliation, loneliness, dread, moral injury, or a collapsed future. A consequence may be food, money, escape, or praise, but it

may also be dignity, identity coherence, narrative closure, belonging, avoidance of a feared self-description, or the feeling of not being the kind of person one fears becoming.

Relational Frame Theory is important here because it offers a behavior-analytic account of how language and cognition transform stimulus functions. Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Roche (2001) describe relational responding as central to human language and cognition. In practical terms, words, categories, rules, and symbolic relations can change what stimuli do behaviorally. A stimulus can become appetitive, aversive, sacred, disgusting, heroic, forbidden, or shameful because of its position in a learned relational network, not merely because of direct contact with the stimulus itself.

Behavioral liquidity builds on this. It asks not only whether a behavior has a reinforcer, but whether the whole action path is convertible into movement under the current field. A person may have access to a reinforcer yet still not act if the response has high symbolic cost. A person may possess the skill yet fail to perform it if the social context makes the skill too dangerous to deploy. A person may understand a rule yet not follow it if the rule is ambiguous, identity-threatening, or unsupported by credible future reward.

The flat model says the person had option A and option B. The liquidity model says that option A may have been available physically but unavailable symbolically, socially, institutionally, or temporally. The behavior analyst sees the response; behavioral liquidity asks how expensive it was, in the total field, to convert intention into that response.

3. Coase: Transaction Costs and the Hidden Price of Acting

Coase's account of the firm provides the first major economic pillar of this framework. In 'The Nature of the Firm,' Coase (1937) asked why firms exist if markets can coordinate activity through prices. His answer was that using the market is not costless. Search, bargaining, contracting, monitoring, enforcement, uncertainty, and coordination all impose transaction costs. Firms emerge when organizing activity internally is cheaper than repeated external contracting.

The behavioral generalization is direct: actions also have transaction costs. A person does not simply select the behavior with the highest reinforcement value. They select among behaviors that vary in search cost, interpretation cost, negotiation cost, initiation cost, switching cost, trust cost, enforcement cost, repair cost, ambiguity cost, social-risk cost, and identity cost. A behavior that appears adaptive from the outside may be transactionally expensive from the inside. A behavior that appears irrational may be the cheapest behavior to coordinate in the moment.

For example, a child who screams instead of asking for help may not lack all communication. Asking for help can require orienting to another person, selecting words, tolerating delay, risking refusal, risking humiliation, trusting the listener, and believing that help will actually reduce the task demand. Screaming may have enormous long-term cost, but in the moment it may be the lower-transaction-cost response. It is liquid. The adaptive alternative is illiquid.

Similarly, a parent who yells despite knowing a behavior plan may not reject the plan. Implementing the plan may require remembering steps, inhibiting emotion, coordinating with a partner, delivering reinforcement consistently, tolerating an extinction burst, and believing that delayed improvement will occur. Yelling may be harmful but immediately available, historically rehearsed, and sometimes temporarily effective. Yelling is liquid; the plan is illiquid.

Coase also gives a powerful explanation for why institutions exist. Institutions reduce repeated negotiation. A family, school, workplace, religion, court, platform, diagnosis, behavior plan, and ritual all reduce the cost of coordinating behavior by stabilizing expectations, rules, roles, boundaries, and consequences. The institution says, in effect: here is what this situation means; here is who has authority; here is what counts; here is what happens next; here is what is rewarded; here is what is punished; here is how disputes are handled.

This does not mean institutions are always good. It means they are transaction-cost devices. They make some behaviors liquid by overlearning and stabilizing them. They make other behaviors illiquid by hiding, punishing, pathologizing, bureaucratizing, or morally loading them. A school may make credential pursuit liquid while making

curiosity illiquid. A workplace may make compliance liquid while making dissent illiquid. A religion may make moral interpretation liquid while making doubt illiquid. A diagnosis may make services liquid while making the individual overcompressed by a category.

The Coasean contribution to behavior science is therefore not merely economic. It is architectural. It shows that behavior is organized by costs of coordination. A theory of action must ask not only what consequence follows the behavior, but what it costs to find, interpret, initiate, coordinate, justify, and maintain the alternative.

4. Keynes: Future Confidence and Behavioral Willingness

If Coase explains friction, Keynes explains confidence. Keynes's General Theory emphasizes uncertainty, confidence, long-term expectation, and the instability of investment under conditions where the future cannot be known with certainty. In Chapter 12, Keynes argues that the state of confidence is a major factor in investment because future yields must be estimated under uncertainty (Keynes, 1936/2018). The behavioral translation is simple and profound: expected future reinforcement changes present behavior before the future arrives.

People act not only according to current consequences but according to whether effort appears connected to a future in which consequences remain meaningful. A student studies when school seems connected to future opportunity. A founder persists when effort seems connected to traction. A worker learns a tool when the tool seems connected to future relevance. A patient follows treatment when compliance seems connected to future relief. A depressed person may stop acting not because all reinforcement is absent, but because future reinforcement no longer feels credible.

This is why Keynes belongs beside Coase. Coase explains whether the action path is costly to coordinate. Keynes explains whether the person believes it is worth coordinating at all. If future confidence is high, people tolerate greater transaction costs. If future confidence is low, even small transaction costs become prohibitive. The same paperwork, phone call, workout, study session, or job application has different liquidity depending on whether the person believes it connects to a future that can pay them back.

This also explains behavioral recessions. A behavioral recession occurs when a person, family, classroom, workplace, or culture loses confidence that effort converts into meaningful reinforcement. Skills may still exist. Resources may still exist. Rules may still exist. But the field no longer feels investable. People hoard energy, avoid risk, seek immediate relief, imitate pessimistic models, and reduce exploratory behavior. The system enters low behavioral liquidity.

The Keynesian layer also clarifies why collective mood matters. Confidence, panic, optimism, dread, and animal spirits are not just feelings; they are field conditions that alter action probability. When a workplace believes change is possible, experimentation becomes liquid. When it believes leadership will punish initiative or ignore effort, experimentation becomes illiquid. When a society believes education pays, study becomes more liquid. When that belief collapses, school behavior changes even before the labor market has fully changed.

Thus the Coasean and Keynesian layers are complementary. Coase gives the cost of action; Keynes gives the felt credibility of future return. Behavioral liquidity emerges from their ratio.

5. Behavioral Liquidity: A Construct for Action Conversion

Behavioral liquidity can now be defined precisely: the field-dependent ease with which motive, intention, preference, or value can be converted into action. It is not motivation, though motivation contributes to it. It is not skill, though skill contributes to it. It is not reinforcement, though reinforcement contributes to it. It is the total convertibility of value into behavior under current conditions.

A behavior is liquid when the action path is clear, rehearsed, socially tolerated, institutionally supported, identity-coherent, and connected to credible reinforcement. A behavior is illiquid when the action path is ambiguous, socially dangerous, institutionally obstructed, identity-threatening, shame-laden, unsupported, or future-poor. This allows us to distinguish wanting from moving. A person can want an outcome but not possess a liquid path into the behavior that produces it.

A simplified behavioral liquidity function can be written as BL_t(a_i) = f(R_t, FC_t, M_t, I_t, G_t, TC_t, Amb_t, S_t, Omega_t). Here R is reinforcement value, FC is future confidence, M is memetic charge, I is identity coherence, G is group or model alignment, TC is transaction cost, Amb is ambiguity, S is shame or sanction load, and Omega is the incompleteness, reframing, or edge-case term. A practical form is BL(a_i) = (R_i + FC_i + M_i + I_i + G_i) / (TC_i + Amb_i + S_i + Threat_i) + Omega_i.

This equation is conceptual, not a finished measurement instrument. Its purpose is to show that action probability rises when value, confidence, meaning, and identity coherence increase, and falls when transaction cost, ambiguity, shame, and threat increase. A behavior can become more likely either by increasing the numerator or reducing the denominator. Many interventions fail because they attempt only the numerator: more motivation, more praise, more information, more promised reward. But if the denominator remains too high, the behavior stays illiquid.

This reframing changes assessment. Instead of asking only, 'What reinforces the problem behavior?' we ask, 'What makes the adaptive alternative illiquid?' Instead of asking only, 'Why will they not comply?' we ask, 'Where is the conversion from intention to action breaking down?' Instead of asking only, 'Do they have the skill?' we ask, 'Can the skill be deployed under the actual symbolic, social, and institutional field?'

The construct also explains why maladaptive behaviors persist. They are often liquid. Avoidance is liquid when exposure is socially or emotionally expensive. Anger is liquid when vulnerability is shameful. Scrolling is liquid when deliberate rest requires self-permission. Substance use is liquid when coordinated regulation is costly. Silence is liquid when truth-telling requires negotiation, conflict, and uncertain repair. Overwork is liquid when rest threatens identity. Blame is liquid when grief, ambiguity, or responsibility are too costly to metabolize.

The applied goal is therefore not merely to suppress maladaptive behavior. It is to make the better behavior more liquid than the worse one.

Table 1. Core components of behavioral liquidity

Component	Behavioral question	Effect on liquidity
Reinforcement value	What does the behavior access or avoid?	Higher value generally increases liquidity.
Future confidence	Does effort appear to connect to future payoff?	Higher confidence increases willingness to bear costs.
Transaction cost	How costly is the behavior to initiate, coordinate, and maintain?	Higher cost decreases liquidity.
Memetic charge	What meanings, slogans, frames, or narratives attach to the action?	Can increase or decrease liquidity.
Identity coherence	Does the action fit the person the actor can tolerate being?	Higher coherence increases liquidity.
Shame or sanction load	What humiliation, rejection, punishment, or status loss is expected?	Higher load decreases liquidity.
Rule clarity	Does the actor know what counts and what happens next?	Clarity increases liquidity; ambiguity decreases it.
Incompleteness term	Where do rules, models, or categories fail to decide the case?	May freeze, redirect, or creatively reframe behavior.

6. Memetic Fields as Liquidity Modifiers

A meme is often defined as a unit of cultural transmission, a concept popularized by Dawkins (1976). In this paper, the term is given a behaviorally precise meaning: a meme is a transmissible symbolic compression that alters the probability distribution of perception, valuation, decision, or behavior. A meme is not merely an idea that spreads. It is active when it changes what actions appear available, admirable, shameful, dangerous, forbidden, sacred, pathetic, profitable, or inevitable.

Memes modify behavioral liquidity by reducing or increasing interpretive transaction costs. The phrase 'one day at a time' can make recovery more liquid by compressing the impossible scale of permanent abstinence into a manageable temporal unit. The phrase 'strong people ask for help' can make help-seeking more liquid by reducing shame. The phrase 'AI is leverage, not cheating' can make tool adoption more liquid by preserving identity. Conversely, 'real men do not ask for help' makes help-seeking illiquid. 'If they loved you, they would know' makes direct communication illiquid. 'The system is rigged' can make civic or educational effort illiquid. 'Everyone is judging your body' makes health behavior shame-saturated and therefore unstable.

A memetic field is the currently active distribution of such symbolic compressions around a person or group. It is not culture in general. It is the immediate meaning-weather of a situation. It includes repeated slogans, prestige models, taboos, identity labels, perceived norms, moral frames, enemy images, hero templates, shame scripts, and future narratives. The field tells the organism what this situation is and what kind of person each action would make them.

In this sense, memes are behavioral liquidity devices. They lower the cost of deciding by compressing complexity. But every compression also creates blind spots. The meme 'toxic' may help someone exit harmful dynamics quickly, but it may also overcompress conflict and reduce repair. The meme 'red flag' may speed risk detection, but it may also convert ambiguity into avoidance. The meme 'neurodivergent' may reduce shame and coordinate support, but it may also become a totalizing identity filter if overextended. The meme 'discipline equals freedom' may support effort, but it may also moralize exhaustion.

The principle is: memes reduce behavioral transaction costs by compressing meaning, but every compression creates distortions and edge cases. This is why memetic fields are powerful and dangerous. They make action easier by making interpretation cheaper. But the cheaper the interpretation, the greater the risk of overgeneralization.

For behavior science, the implication is practical. A treatment plan, classroom intervention, health program, or organizational change effort is not merely competing with reinforcement histories. It is competing with memes. If the adaptive behavior is embedded in a meme that makes it humiliating, submissive, uncool, disloyal, futile, or identity-incoherent, it will remain illiquid no matter how rational the plan appears.

7. Girardian Desire: Models, Rivals, and Scapegoats

Dawkins helps explain symbolic replication. Girard helps explain symbolic desire. In Girard's account, desire is mediated: the subject does not simply desire an object directly, but often desires it because a model confers value on it (Girard, 1965). Desire is triangular: subject, model, object. The model may be admired, envied, imitated, resented, or rivalrous. The object becomes valuable because of its position in a social field of desire.

A behavioral translation is that modeled desire functions as a value-transforming antecedent. If a prestigious model desires an object, displays an object, forbids an object, suffers for an object, or competes over an object, the object's reinforcing value may increase. This can be called a mimetic establishing operation: ModelDesire(x) increases Value(x). The model's desire alters the liquidity of pursuing the object.

This is visible in children wanting the toy another child picked up, adolescents desiring the body type algorithmically rewarded by attention, professionals desiring credentials honored by elite peers, consumers desiring brands displayed by high-status models, and citizens desiring punishment of a scapegoated group because the in-group models that desire. Desire is not private in the simple sense. It is socially mediated, contagious, and rivalrous.

Girard also explains why scapegoats are liquidity devices. A group under internal tension faces high interpretive transaction cost. The causes of conflict may be complex, distributed, and ambiguous. A scapegoat lowers the cost of interpretation by concentrating blame. Instead of understanding systemic failure, the group converges on an object: this person, this group, this ideology, this outsider, this traitor. Scapegoating is morally dangerous, but behaviorally efficient. It makes group coordination liquid through shared blame.

This matters clinically and institutionally. Families often stabilize around a problem person. Workplaces stabilize around a difficult employee. Political movements stabilize around enemies. Schools stabilize around noncompliant

students. Clinical systems stabilize around diagnostic categories. In each case, a complex field is compressed into a manageable object. The compression lowers transaction cost while risking injustice and blindness.

Girard therefore adds a topology to memetic fields. Memes do not merely spread as content; they organize desire, rivalry, imitation, prestige, and blame. Behavioral liquidity is often increased not by objective reward, but by alignment with the model one imitates or the rival one seeks to overcome.

8. Gödelian Incompleteness as Rule-System Humility

Gödel's incompleteness theorems are mathematical results concerning formal systems capable of expressing arithmetic. The first theorem states, roughly, that any consistent formal system of sufficient expressive strength contains statements that are neither provable nor disprovable within that system. The second theorem shows that such a system cannot prove its own consistency from within itself (Raatikainen, 2022). This paper does not claim that Gödel directly proves a fact about behavior, institutions, or human freedom. That would be a category error.

The use here is analogical and methodological. Human rule systems are self-referential. They contain agents who can perceive, interpret, exploit, resist, and modify the rules that attempt to govern them. A rule system created to reduce ambiguity will generate edge cases. A metric created to measure performance will generate metric-gaming. A diagnosis created to coordinate care will alter self-understanding. A platform rule created to govern speech will produce evasive speech. A behavior plan created to define target behavior will produce boundary questions: Does this count? What if I do the form but not the function? What if I satisfy the rule while violating its purpose?

The Gödelian principle in this paper is: any sufficiently rich behavior-governance system generates cases its existing rules cannot fully decide, especially once agents can model and respond to the system itself. This is not the incompleteness theorem applied literally. It is a rule-system humility principle.

Institutions exist to reduce ambiguity, but they cannot eliminate ambiguity. A school discipline system must decide whether a behavior is defiance, disability, trauma, cultural mismatch, peer signaling, or poor instruction. An insurance system must decide whether care is medically necessary, excessive, preventive, experimental, or documentation-deficient. A workplace must decide whether poor performance reflects incompetence, burnout, disability, mismanagement, unclear expectations, or role mismatch. A platform must decide whether speech is misinformation, satire, coded extremism, critique, parody, or harm. A family must decide whether a behavior is selfishness, boundary-setting, avoidance, repair, rebellion, or self-protection.

The rule system cannot decide all cases from within its current rules. It requires judgment, precedent, power, revision, negotiation, or new meta-rules. Then the new rules generate new edge cases. This creates the institutional loop: RuleSystem_t produces EdgeCase_t, which produces MetaRule_t+1, which produces NewEdgeCase_t+2.

This matters for behavioral liquidity because rule systems are supposed to make action liquid. But when rules generate unresolved edge cases, they produce illiquidity. People freeze, game, avoid, appeal, rebel, or create informal workarounds. The more self-aware the agents become, the more reflexive the rule system becomes. The model enters the field it tries to organize.

9. Hyper-Decision Space

Human action does not occur in a flat choice menu. It occurs in hyper-decision space: the high-dimensional field of perceived possible actions, each weighted by reinforcement, cost, meaning, identity, social threat, future confidence, memetic charge, mimetic desire, and rule-fit. A simple model might say the person can choose A, B, or C. A field model says each option has a vector of properties that determine its liquidity.

A candidate action can be represented as a_i = [R_i, FC_i, TC_i, M_i, I_i, G_i, S_i, Amb_i, P_i, Omega_i]. R is reinforcement; FC is future confidence; TC is transaction cost; M is memetic intensity; I is identity coherence; G is model, rival, or group alignment; S is shame or sanction; Amb is ambiguity; P is prestige payoff; Omega is the incompleteness or reframing term. The person does not evaluate all possible actions explicitly. Many are not even perceived. The action set itself is field-shaped.

This explains why outside observers often misunderstand behavior. They see the physical option but not the field vector. 'Just ask for help' may look simple, but the vector may include shame, rejection risk, language demand, delayed response, uncertain authority, identity threat, and prior punishment. 'Just leave' may look simple, but the vector may include housing, children, legal complexity, grief, social explanation, financial risk, spiritual belief, and terror of uncertainty. 'Just use AI' may look simple, but the vector may include novice shame, professional identity threat, surveillance risk, output uncertainty, and fear of being replaced.

The person often selects not the objectively best behavior but the most liquid coherent behavior. 'Coherent' matters because humans seek actions that preserve some internal and social intelligibility. A behavior may be physically easy but identity-incoherent; it will still be illiquid. Another behavior may be materially costly but symbolically coherent; it may be chosen repeatedly.

Therefore, behavior often follows the path of least coherent transaction cost. This is not the same as laziness or pleasure maximization. It means the organism moves through the field along the route that best converts current state into action while preserving enough reinforcement, meaning, identity, and social viability.

10. Institutions as Stabilized Liquidity Systems

An institution is a stabilized system of rules, roles, sanctions, resources, meanings, and expectations that reduces the cost of coordinating behavior at scale. Institutions make some behaviors liquid and others illiquid. A school makes studying, credentialing, testing, ranking, disciplining, and age-based grouping liquid. A workplace makes role assignment, production, supervision, payment, evaluation, and hierarchy liquid. A religion makes moral interpretation, ritual, community, marriage norms, grief practices, and existential explanation liquid. A family makes care, obligation, loyalty, attachment, conflict patterns, and role expectation liquid. A clinical diagnosis makes explanation, insurance, accommodation, professional coordination, and identity formation liquid.

Institutions are therefore not simply oppressive structures or neutral tools. They are liquidity architectures. They answer repeated behavioral questions before the person has to ask them: Who is responsible? What counts? What happens next? Who decides? What is rewarded? What is forbidden? What story explains this? Where do I go? What form do I fill out? What language do I use? What identity applies?

The benefit is coordination. The cost is overcompression. The school may coordinate education while narrowing learning. The workplace may coordinate production while reducing moral agency. The religion may coordinate existential life while punishing doubt. The family may coordinate care while trapping members in roles. The diagnosis may coordinate services while obscuring the individual. The behavior plan may coordinate intervention while flattening meaning.

This is why reform often produces both liberation and new friction. When an old institution is dismantled, some oppressive illiquidity may be removed. But the coordinating function also disappears. People must renegotiate meanings, roles, expectations, and boundaries. A culture can become freer and less liquid at the same time. The task is not merely to destroy institutions but to design better liquidity systems: rules and practices that reduce unnecessary friction while preserving interpretive freedom and dignity.

In behavior science, this means that environmental arrangement is not only physical. It is institutional. A good intervention stabilizes the adaptive action path. It makes the right behavior easier to initiate, interpret, coordinate, reinforce, and maintain. A bad intervention adds paperwork, ambiguity, shame, surveillance, or conflicting rules, thereby decreasing liquidity even while increasing stated expectations.

11. Clinical and Applied Translation

A behavioral-liquidity assessment does not replace functional assessment. It extends it. Standard functional assessment asks what antecedents precede the behavior, what consequences follow, what function the behavior serves, what motivating operations are active, and what replacement behavior can access the same function. Behavioral-liquidity assessment adds a second layer: what transaction costs block the adaptive behavior, what future payoff has lost credibility, what memes make the behavior shameful or desirable, what models mediate the person's

desire, what institutional rules stabilize or block the behavior, what identity would be threatened by change, and what edge case the current rule system cannot handle.

The guiding question becomes: what is making the adaptive behavior illiquid? The answer may be low reinforcement, but it may also be high transaction cost, low future confidence, shame load, identity conflict, mimetic rivalry, unclear rules, or institutional obstruction. This supports more humane and precise intervention.

Consider a child who refuses schoolwork. Standard analysis may identify escape from task demand. Liquidity analysis asks why asking for help is illiquid. Perhaps help-seeking has high language demand, social risk, prior punishment, and shame. The intervention is not simply to demand compliance; it is to make help-seeking liquid by reducing response effort, normalizing help, reinforcing approximations, and restoring confidence that effort converts into success.

Consider a parent who yells despite knowing the plan. Standard analysis may identify immediate escape or control restoration. Liquidity analysis asks why the plan is illiquid under stress. Perhaps it requires too many steps, no partner alignment, delayed payoff, and high emotional inhibition. The intervention is to reduce plan transaction cost: scripts, visual prompts, smaller routines, immediate reinforcement for parent behavior, and environmental support.

Consider an adult who cannot begin health behavior. Standard explanations may blame discipline. Liquidity analysis asks what makes the healthy action path illiquid. The answer may include shame, all-or-nothing identity, marital conflict, food environment, fatigue, low future confidence, and prior failure. The intervention is to lower shame and transaction cost, make the first action tiny, build immediate reinforcement, and reframe health as self-alignment rather than proof of worth.

This approach also applies to organizations. If employees do not adopt a tool, leaders may assume resistance. Liquidity analysis asks whether the tool path is unclear, socially risky, identity-threatening, unsupported, or disconnected from credible reward. Adoption improves when experimentation becomes safe, prestigious, supported, and easy to coordinate.

Assessment prompt set

- What is the currently most liquid behavior, even if it is maladaptive?
- What costs make the adaptive alternative hard to convert into action?
- What future payoff has become noncredible?
- What shame, identity threat, or social sanction attaches to the adaptive behavior?
- What meme or model currently makes the problem behavior coherent?
- What rule ambiguity or institutional friction is blocking action?
- What small design change would reduce the transaction cost of the adaptive path?
- What immediate reinforcement can be attached to the first step of the alternative?

12. Examples Across Domains

Health behavior. A person wants to improve health but does not consistently exercise or eat well. The naive explanation is weak motivation. The liquidity explanation asks whether the healthy path is jammed by hidden costs: shopping, cooking, planning, shame, family conflict, hunger, fatigue, injury, lack of immediate reinforcement, social comparison, and low confidence that change will last. The old behavior may be liquid because it provides immediate relief and avoids shame. Health intervention must therefore increase the liquidity of small adaptive actions rather than simply moralize the outcome.

Addiction and substance use. Substance use often provides immediate reinforcement, escape, sensory regulation, social bonding, ritual, and identity continuity. Sobriety may require new sleep systems, social systems, emotional regulation systems, peer systems, and future-confidence systems. The substance is liquid; the alternative life is illiquid. Recovery often succeeds when it creates replacement liquidity: meetings, scripts, sponsors, routines, slogans, identity, rituals, immediate reinforcement, and one-day temporal compression.

Education. Students may fail not because they are incapable, but because educational effort has low future confidence or high identity cost. If school no longer feels connected to a meaningful future, study becomes illiquid. If asking questions signals stupidity, help-seeking becomes illiquid. If peer status depends on not caring, effort becomes illiquid. Effective education must restore credible future linkage and make competence-seeking socially safe.

Work and AI adoption. AI tools can be framed as cheating, threat, leverage, assistant, replacement, or literacy. Each meme changes liquidity. Workers who see AI as identity destruction avoid it. Workers who see AI as leverage explore it. Organizations that make experimentation safe and prestigious increase behavioral liquidity. Organizations that punish mistakes, provide unclear policies, or moralize adoption create illiquidity.

Family systems. Families stabilize roles: the responsible one, the difficult one, the sick one, the selfish one, the strong one. These labels make certain behaviors liquid and others illiquid. The responsible one may find asking for help illiquid. The difficult one may find repair illiquid because rebellion is the available identity. Family change requires changing the liquidity of roles, not merely telling members to behave differently.

Politics and media. Algorithmic media changes liquidity by altering salience, repetition, social proof, prestige cues, outrage, enemy images, and perceived norms. A political behavior becomes liquid when it is memetically available, socially rewarded, identity-coherent, and emotionally charged. Scapegoating is especially liquid because it compresses complexity into blame. Democratic health depends in part on making deliberation, nuance, and repair more liquid than outrage.

13. Predictions and Research Program

A useful theory should produce testable predictions. The behavioral-liquidity framework predicts, first, that transaction-cost reduction will increase adaptive behavior independent of reinforcement magnitude. If two response forms contact similar reinforcement, the lower-cost response should occur more often. This can be tested by manipulating response effort, ambiguity, number of steps, social negotiation, and delay while holding reinforcer quality constant.

Second, future confidence should moderate persistence. Under equal immediate reinforcement schedules, participants who believe a behavior connects to future payoff should persist longer than participants who believe the behavior is obsolete, futile, or disconnected from future reward. This would operationalize the Keynesian layer.

Third, memetic framing should alter response allocation. The same behavior framed as discipline, care, rebellion, conformity, shame avoidance, or prestige should show different adoption rates, affective responses, and persistence. This would test whether symbolic compression changes liquidity.

Fourth, prestige-model exposure should increase the liquidity of modeled behaviors. Participants exposed to high-status models performing or desiring an action should rate the action as more valuable and should be more likely to perform it than participants exposed to low-status or neutral models. This would operationalize the Girardian mimetic establishing operation.

Fifth, shame should increase illiquidity even when reinforcement is high. If an action is materially beneficial but framed as embarrassing, weak, needy, or low-status, people should avoid it more than a materially equivalent action framed as competent, generous, or high-status.

Sixth, rule visibility should produce gaming. When agents know the evaluation rule, behavior should shift toward optimizing the visible metric rather than the underlying purpose. This has implications for schools, workplaces, platforms, and clinical measurement.

Seventh, symbolic-function matching should improve intervention durability. Replacement behaviors matched to both material function and symbolic function should maintain better than replacement behaviors matched only to material function. For example, if aggression functions partly to preserve dignity, a replacement behavior that accesses escape but not dignity may fail.

A research program could include laboratory tasks with manipulated transaction costs; future-confidence manipulations; memetic-frame experiments; prestige-model exposure designs; simulations of rule-system edge

cases; and clinical trials comparing standard function-based intervention with function-plus-liquidity intervention. The goal would be to turn behavioral liquidity from a conceptual bridge into a measurable applied construct.

14. Ethical Implications

A theory of behavioral liquidity can help people. It can also manipulate them. If behavior depends on liquidity, power belongs to whoever can make some paths easier and others harder. Platforms do this through salience and friction. Schools do this through rules and grades. Employers do this through metrics and incentives. Religions do this through rituals and moral frames. Families do this through roles and approval. Therapists do this through treatment plans and language. Governments do this through law and administration. Marketers do this through identity and desire.

The ethical question is not whether behavior is influenced. Behavior is always influenced. The question is whether influence increases agency or reduces it. Ethical liquidity design should reduce unnecessary friction for adaptive behavior, avoid shame as a primary control strategy, make rules visible and contestable, preserve interpretive freedom, support dignity, increase the person's ability to perceive the field, and make beneficial actions easier without covertly trapping the person.

This is especially important in clinical and educational contexts. Making a behavior liquid by increasing fear, shame, surveillance, or dependency may produce compliance while reducing agency. The goal should be not merely to move behavior, but to increase the person's capacity to move with awareness. A humane intervention does not simply engineer the person. It helps the person perceive and reprice the field acting upon them.

The proposed ethical principle is: freedom is not behavior without causes; freedom is the increased capacity to perceive, name, and reconfigure the fields that shape one's action. This definition avoids the false choice between determinism and dignity. Behavior has causes, but people can gain degrees of freedom by becoming aware of those causes, changing environments, revising rules, selecting models, reducing transaction costs, and restoring credible futures.

In social design, this means we should be suspicious of systems that make destructive behavior liquid and constructive behavior illiquid. Endless scrolling is liquid; deliberate creation is often illiquid. Outrage is liquid; deliberation is illiquid. Blame is liquid; repair is illiquid. Consumption is liquid; maintenance is illiquid. Good institutions reverse this where possible.

15. Limitations

The framework has several risks. First, it may become too broad. If behavioral liquidity means everything that affects behavior, it means nothing. The construct must be used specifically to refer to the conversion ease between motive and action under field conditions. It should not be a decorative synonym for motivation.

Second, memetic field language can become vague. To avoid this, memetic fields should be operationalized through observable indicators: repeated slogans, perceived norms, prestige cues, taboo markers, social sanctions, identity labels, imitation models, algorithmic salience, narrative frames, and the measured effects of framing on choice.

Third, the Gödelian analogy must remain disciplined. Gödel's theorems are formal mathematical results, not proof that behavior is mystical or unmodelable. The relevant analogy is about the incompleteness of self-referential rule systems once agents can respond to the rules. The paper's claim is methodological humility, not mathematical derivation.

Fourth, the theory may overemphasize symbolic factors at the expense of material constraints. This would be a mistake. Biology, poverty, sleep, pain, disability, trauma, housing, food access, and coercive power all directly affect liquidity. Symbolic analysis should not replace material analysis. Rather, behavioral liquidity should include both material and symbolic costs.

Fifth, measurement will be difficult. Transaction costs, shame load, future confidence, identity coherence, and memetic charge are not simple variables. They require validated scales, behavioral tasks, qualitative mapping, ecological measurement, and careful experimental designs.

Finally, the model must prove its worth in applied settings. It should help clinicians, educators, designers, leaders, and researchers predict where action conversion will fail and how to make adaptive behavior more liquid. If it does not improve assessment or intervention, it remains merely elegant language.

16. Conclusion

Behavior science gives us selection by consequences. Coase gives us transaction costs and institutions. Keynes gives us uncertainty, confidence, and expectation. Dawkins gives us symbolic replication. Girard gives us mediated desire, rivalry, and scapegoating. Gödel gives us humility before self-referential rule systems that cannot close upon themselves. Together they produce a stronger account of human action: behavior occurs inside incomplete symbolic economies where action paths vary in liquidity.

People do not merely choose between behaviors. They move through fields of cost, meaning, expectation, identity, rivalry, shame, and institutional structure. Adaptive behavior fails not only when reinforcement is weak, but when the adaptive path is illiquid. Maladaptive behavior persists not only because it is pleasurable, but because it is liquid.

This gives behavior science a new applied question: how do we make the better behavior easier to convert into action than the worse one? That question respects reinforcement, but it also respects the symbolic organism. It recognizes that humans act through language, institutions, memes, models, expectations, and rules. It recognizes that the person may know, want, and still be unable to move because the path is jammed by costs the outside observer does not see.

The final formulation is: behavioral liquidity is the field-dependent ease with which intention becomes action. It rises when reinforcement, meaning, identity, and future confidence outweigh transaction costs, ambiguity, shame, and social risk. Memes, rules, and institutions evolve to increase behavioral liquidity by compressing meaning and reducing coordination costs, but because humans can reinterpret and game the systems that organize them, every such system remains incomplete.

The simplest version is also the most useful: people do not fail to act only because they lack motivation; they fail when the path from motive to action becomes illiquid.

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Appendix A. Operational Definitions and Measurement Targets

This appendix translates the theory into measurable constructs. Behavioral liquidity should be treated as a family of observable and reportable variables rather than a single hidden inner state. The construct becomes useful only when researchers and practitioners can ask which part of the action path is blocked and then observe whether changing that part changes behavior.

Reinforcement value refers to the degree to which the action contacts immediate or delayed appetitive consequences or avoids aversive consequences. It can be measured through choice allocation, preference assessments, persistence, latency, demand curves, self-report, or naturalistic observation. In a liquidity model, reinforcement value remains essential, but it is not assumed to be sufficient.

Transaction cost refers to the total coordination burden of the behavior. This includes response effort, number of steps, search demand, planning demand, initiation demand, switching demand, negotiation burden, documentation burden, waiting burden, and the need to coordinate with other people or institutions. Transaction cost can be measured by task analysis, step count, time-to-initiation, number of required interactions, error opportunities, and subjective burden ratings.

Ambiguity refers to uncertainty about what action counts, what rule applies, what consequence will follow, what another person means, or how the institution will classify the act. Ambiguity can be measured by confidence ratings, latency under unclear instructions, disagreement among observers, frequency of clarification requests, and rate of rule disputes or edge cases.

Future confidence refers to the felt credibility that present effort will convert into future value. This is the Keynesian variable. It is not optimism in general. It is behavior-specific confidence that an action still participates in a reward economy. It can be measured by ratings of expected payoff, persistence under delay, willingness to invest effort, and sensitivity to information about future opportunity.

Memetic charge refers to the symbolic intensity attached to an action. A behavior can be charged by memes of discipline, weakness, rebellion, purity, failure, success, masculinity, femininity, intelligence, laziness, care, betrayal, or belonging. Memetic charge can be measured through semantic differential scales, reaction-time classification, narrative elicitation, social-media exposure mapping, and changes in choice after framing manipulations.

Identity coherence refers to whether the action fits a self-description the person can tolerate inhabiting. Some adaptive behaviors are illiquid because they require the person to become, even briefly, a novice, a needy person, a disciplined person, a patient person, a person who admits harm, a person who sets boundaries, or a person who no longer belongs to an old group. Identity coherence can be measured through self-concept fit ratings, avoidance latency, shame ratings, and narrative analysis.

Shame or sanction load refers to expected humiliation, moral condemnation, status loss, rejection, punishment, or relational cost. It is often the hidden denominator of behavioral liquidity. Shame load can be measured by avoidance under social visibility, physiological arousal, self-report, refusal to disclose, and differences between private and public choice.

Mimetic alignment refers to whether the action is modeled by admired figures, required by a valued group, opposed by a rival, or associated with a scapegoated identity. It can be measured by model-exposure experiments, peer network mapping, prestige ratings, and the extent to which behavior changes after a high-status model performs the action.

The incompleteness term refers to unresolved edge cases, self-referential reactions, loopholes, reframings, and rule failures. It is not a mystical variable. It can be operationalized by tracking disputes over classification, metric gaming, exceptions, workarounds, ironic compliance, and behavior that satisfies the letter of a rule while violating its purpose.

Appendix B. Behavioral Liquidity Assessment Instrument - Draft

The following draft instrument can be used as a structured clinical, educational, or organizational interview. Items can be rated from 0 to 4, where 0 means not present and 4 means strongly present. The goal is not to produce a final diagnostic score but to locate the binding constraint that makes the adaptive behavior illiquid.

- Reinforcement path: The person can identify what the adaptive behavior would access, avoid, or improve.
- Immediate payoff: The adaptive behavior produces some near-term consequence, not only a distant promise.
- Future confidence: The person believes the behavior connects to a future that can actually reward effort.
- Step clarity: The first three steps of the behavior are obvious and concrete.
- Response effort: The behavior can be performed without excessive physical, cognitive, or executive burden.
- Social safety: The behavior can be performed without intolerable humiliation, rejection, or conflict.
- Rule clarity: The person knows what counts as doing it correctly.
- Institutional support: The surrounding system supports the behavior rather than requiring constant renegotiation.
- Identity fit: The behavior does not require an intolerable self-description.
- Memetic support: The surrounding language and norms make the behavior admirable, acceptable, or meaningful.
- Model support: A valued model or peer group performs or respects the behavior.
- Replacement liquidity: The adaptive alternative is at least as easy to initiate as the problem behavior.
- Edge-case handling: Ambiguous cases are anticipated, and the person knows what to do when the rule does not fit.
- Maintenance support: The behavior has routines, cues, and reinforcers that support repetition over time.
- Repair path: If the behavior fails, there is a low-shame way to restart.

Interpretation: Low scores in reinforcement path suggest a value problem. Low scores in step clarity, response effort, or institutional support suggest a Coasean transaction-cost problem. Low scores in future confidence suggest a Keynesian confidence problem. Low scores in social safety, identity fit, or memetic support suggest a symbolic-field problem. Low scores in edge-case handling suggest a rule-system incompleteness problem. The intervention should target the lowest binding constraints first.

Appendix C. Intervention Design Patterns

Make the first step smaller

When initiation cost blocks action, reduce the first step until it can be performed under stress. The first step should be so small that it restores motion before requiring full motivation.

Add immediate reinforcement

When the desired behavior depends only on distant outcomes, attach immediate feedback, praise, sensory relief, progress marking, or social recognition.

Reduce interpretive cost

Use scripts, checklists, examples, templates, visual cues, and clear definitions. The person should not have to rediscover the rule each time.

Reduce negotiation cost

Pre-agree on roles, times, criteria, and consequences. Many adaptive behaviors fail because each attempt requires a fresh interpersonal negotiation.

Reframe the meme

If the adaptive behavior is shame-coded, change its symbolic meaning. Help-seeking can become competence. Rest can become training. AI use can become leverage. Repair can become strength.

Borrow a model

Use credible models who already perform the target behavior. A behavior often becomes more liquid when it is visibly performed by someone the person respects.

Create a low-shame restart

Many systems fail because relapse or inconsistency becomes identity collapse. Build a restart ritual that makes returning easier than quitting.

Clarify edge cases

Before implementation, ask what could make the rule ambiguous. Decide what counts, what does not count, and what to do when the case is unclear.

Stabilize future confidence

Show believable evidence that effort can pay off. Use short feedback loops, visible progress, and credible stories rather than grand promises.

Change the environment before blaming the person

If the problem behavior is more liquid than the alternative, environmental design should be examined before moral judgment.

Appendix D. Extended Case Formulations

Case 1: The learner who melts down instead of asking for help

A learner has been taught to say, 'Help please,' but in difficult academic tasks the response rarely occurs. Instead, the learner cries, leaves the table, or destroys materials. A conventional function-based interpretation may identify escape from demands. That interpretation is useful but incomplete. The liquidity formulation asks why the replacement response is illiquid. The learner may not know when help is allowed, may have a history of being corrected when asking, may experience help as proof of failure, may not trust that help will reduce the demand, or may be unable to coordinate language under frustration. The intervention should not merely prompt the phrase. It should lower the transaction cost of help-seeking: provide a help card, reinforce early approximations, normalize help as part of mastery, reduce delay, and ensure that help actually changes the task experience. The goal is to make help more liquid than escape.

Case 2: The adult who avoids paperwork

Paperwork avoidance is often misread as laziness. In a liquidity model, paperwork may contain search cost, ambiguity cost, institutional threat, shame, time uncertainty, and fear of making an irreversible mistake. The form is not one behavior; it is a maze of micro-decisions under threat. A liquidity intervention would break the form into steps, clarify definitions, provide examples, create a safe review process, remove unnecessary fields, and attach immediate completion feedback. The task becomes liquid when the person no longer has to carry the entire institution in working memory.

Case 3: The clinician who resists a new documentation tool

A clinician may resist an AI documentation tool while privately suspecting it could help. The tool threatens competence identity, raises confidentiality worries, changes workflow, and creates uncertainty about evaluation. The old method is slow but coherent. The new method is faster but symbolically dangerous. Adoption requires more than training. It requires a safe sandbox, clear rules, peer models, visible quality controls, protected learning time, and a meme that preserves clinical judgment rather than replacing it. The tool becomes liquid when use feels like professional amplification instead of professional erasure.

Case 4: The couple caught in repeated conflict

A couple repeats the same argument. Each partner knows that calm repair would help, but repair is illiquid. It requires vulnerability, timing, trust, self-inhibition, and willingness to risk not being met. Accusation is liquid because it restores temporary power and coherence. Withdrawal is liquid because it reduces immediate exposure. The intervention is to lower the transaction cost of repair: scripts, time-outs, repair windows, explicit agreements, low-shame restarts, and reframing apology as strength rather than defeat.

Case 5: The organization that cannot change

An organization announces a new strategy but behavior does not change. Leaders assume cultural resistance. Liquidity analysis asks whether the new behavior has a path. Are incentives aligned? Are managers modeling it? Are old metrics still punishing it? Do employees know what counts? Is failure safe? Does the future payoff feel credible? Do existing roles make the new behavior socially dangerous? Change becomes possible when the new behavior is more liquid than the old workaround.

Appendix E. Relationship to ABA, CBT, ACT, and Behavioral Economics

Behavioral liquidity is compatible with applied behavior analysis because it preserves the central importance of function, antecedents, consequences, motivating operations, and environmental arrangement. Its contribution is to expand the notion of environment to include transaction costs, institutional structure, symbolic meaning, and future confidence. It is not a replacement for functional analysis; it is a supplementary layer for complex verbal and institutional contexts.

The framework overlaps with cognitive behavioral therapy in its attention to beliefs and interpretations, but it avoids treating cognition as an isolated inner cause. Beliefs matter because they alter stimulus functions, transaction costs, future confidence, and action liquidity. The question is not only whether a thought is true, but what the thought does to the action path.

The framework overlaps with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy through its emphasis on language, values, psychological flexibility, and committed action. Behavioral liquidity can be understood as one way to describe why valued action fails under fusion, avoidance, shame, and unclear contextual support. ACT often increases liquidity by defusing harmful rules, clarifying values, and making small committed actions possible.

The framework overlaps with behavioral economics through bounded rationality, friction, default effects, and choice architecture. Its distinctive addition is to connect those ideas to memetic fields, identity, mimetic desire, and rule-system incompleteness. The person is bounded not only by information and cognitive bias, but by institutions, memes, relationships, shame, and futures that may or may not feel credible.

The framework also helps explain why psychoeducation alone often fails. Information can increase liquidity when ignorance is the bottleneck. But when the bottleneck is shame, transaction cost, low future confidence, or institutional friction, more information may do little. The intervention must match the liquidity constraint.

Appendix F. Glossary

- Behavioral liquidity: The field-dependent ease with which motive, intention, preference, or value can be converted into action.
- Behavioral recession: A low-liquidity state in which future confidence collapses and effort no longer feels connected to meaningful reinforcement.
- Transaction cost: The total burden of finding, interpreting, initiating, negotiating, coordinating, enforcing, and maintaining an action.
- Future confidence: The felt credibility that present action will connect to future payoff or relief.
- Memetic field: The active distribution of symbolic meanings, norms, slogans, models, taboos, and narratives that alter action probability.

- Mimetic establishing operation: A modeled desire or prestige signal that increases the value of an object or action.
- Hyper-decision space: The high-dimensional field of perceived possible actions, each weighted by reinforcement, cost, meaning, identity, shame, future confidence, and rule-fit.
- Rule-system incompleteness: The tendency of sufficiently rich rule systems to generate edge cases, loopholes, disputes, and model-reactive behavior not decidable by the current rule set.
- Symbolic-function matching: Designing replacement behavior that satisfies not only the material function of a behavior but also its identity, dignity, status, or meaning function.
- Liquidity design: The ethical arrangement of environments, rules, meanings, and reinforcers so that adaptive behavior is easier to convert into action.