

[Place. U. T. (1987b). Skinner re-placed. In S. Modgil and C. Modgil (Eds.), B. F. Skinner, Consensus and Controversy (Part XI, Skinner and the 'Virtus dormitiva' argument, pp. 249-251). Falmer Press.]

Interchange

PLACE REPLIES TO DENNETT

SKINNER RE-PLACED

While it is clear from Dennett's reply that we are in substantial agreement about what is wrong with Skinner's reasons, both explicit and implicit, for repudiating mentalism, we are still far apart on the nature of mentalism and on the question of whether there are any circumstances under which the use of mentalistic explanations needs to be repudiated for the purposes of science and, if so, what those circumstances are. This is an important issue because, if I am right, Skinner's analysis of behaviour survives more or less intact, it is only the reasons he gives for adopting that analysis which are threatened; whereas, if Dennett is right, there is no room for the analysis either.

Since Dennett has responded to my paper by discussing each section in the original order, I shall respond to his detailed criticisms in the same order.

(1) I accept that I was wrong to suggest that it is a matter of indifference whether we ascribe a dispositional property to the causal agent or the causal patient. Although I am not sure that I know what it is, I am confident that there is some general principle which determines which of the two a dispositional property is assigned to in ordinary language. I am sure that Dennett is right to suggest that our ordinary practice in assigning appetites and aversions to the behaving organism, rather than to the stimuli towards or away from which the behaviour in question is directed, has a basis in the fact that 'one man's meat' can be and often is 'another man's poison'. I am persuaded nevertheless that Skinner's alternative way of construing the matter is not only perfectly legitimate (after all, it is no different from describing a stimulus event as pleasant or unpleasant), it can also be a valuable corrective to an excessive reliance on imputing intractable behavioural dispositions to the individual in excusing one's failure to deal adequately with a problem of disruptive or maladaptive behaviour.

(2) Although he accepts my contention that it is its tautological character that accounts for the vacuity of arguments of the *virtus dormitiva* type. Dennett does not accept my account of what saves the explanation from vacuity in the case where we explain Tom's taking the uptown bus in terms of his desire to go to Macy's and his belief that Macy's is uptown. On my account this explanation is saved from vacuity by the fact that a particular event, Tom's taking the uptown bus, is explained by reference to one or more dispositional properties *which are ascribed to the individual in question*. According to Dennett what saves the explanation from vacuity is its functionalist character. Functionalism, he maintains, consists in 'the insistence that one can non-vacuously analyze complex dispositional states (e.g. competences) into interacting complexes of other dispositions (e.g. beliefs and desires) without ever descending to the level of the physical microstructure'. The explanation is saved from vacuity on this view by the fact that it involves two interacting dispositions, a belief and a desire. It would have been vacuous had it consisted in ascribing a single disposition such as an 'uptown bus affinity'.

This view seems to be mistaken on two counts. In the first place there is nothing vacuous, as I see it, in attributing Tom's taking an uptown bus to his uptown bus affinity. Human nature being what it is, uptown-bus-travelling buffs are no doubt rare. But that does not alter the fact that to attribute Tom's behaviour to such an addiction is a perfectly good non-vacuous single disposition alternative to an explanation in terms of a combination of a belief and a desire. Second, Dennett's account of functionalism seems to me plainly defective. Functionalism I take to be the position which has been advocated for many years by Hilary Putnam (1975), which seeks to account for the behavioural dispositions (e.g. competences) of the organism or system as a whole (not, as in this case, a particular behavioural act) in terms of the dispositional properties of and relations between a set of subsystems within the on-line computer that controls the system as a whole (the brain in the case of living organisms), where the dispositional properties of the subsystems are specified in such a way as not to prejudice the particular type of hardware (electronic circuits, electromagnetic relays, hydraulic valves or neurons) used to instantiate the controlling

computer in the particular case. The fact that in Dennett's own peculiar version of functionalism the dispositional properties of the subsystems are specified in terms of the metaphor of a team of homunculi, each with its own set of desires and beliefs (1978, p. 80) is entirely beside the point.

(3) In connection with the thesis which I attribute to Dr John Burnheim (c. 1969), it is unfortunate that Dennett has not, as I have, had the opportunity of reading Burnheim's paper as well as an advance copy of an important paper on this topic by C. B. Martin and K. Pfeifer (1986). What both these papers show, to my satisfaction at least, is that physical causal dispositions and the idioms which ascribe such properties to objects qualify as intentional by every criterion of intentionality and intensionality that has ever been suggested in the literature on this difficult and controversial issue. In the light of this evidence we are faced with a choice. One alternative is to retain the view that intentionality is whatever it is that distinguishes the mental from the non-mental. Assuming, of course, that there actually *is* some one thing which distinguishes the mental from the physical, the effect of adopting this alternative is to make intentionality into something very different from what it has traditionally been taken to be. Thus Martin and Pfeifer, who take this alternative, propose that intentionality be redefined in terms of sensory experience. The alternative which I favour is that we abandon altogether the notion that intentionality is the mark of the mental, in favour of the view that intentionality is the mark of the dispositional. This has the great advantage of allowing us to retain all the traditional criteria of intentionality and intensionality, including the principle whereby alternative descriptions of the same object or event cannot be substituted within an opaque or intensional context without endangering the truth of the sentence of which it forms part. The purpose of the example which Dennett fails to understand was simply to illustrate the application of that principle to the case of the physical disposition of brittleness. As Martin and Pfeifer point out, a physical disposition like the brittleness of a pane of glass is 'about' the event (the breaking of the pane) towards which the disposition is directed and whose occurrence constitutes its satisfaction in exactly the same way that the mental disposition of, say, wanting an apple is 'about' the event of getting an apple in that is the event towards which the disposition is directed and whose occurrence constitutes its satisfaction.

(4) No contest

(5) I certainly do not think, as Dennett suggests I do, that 'the idea that rationality is dependent on "verbally formulated beliefs" instead of vice versa is . . . uncontroversial'. If I gave that impression, it is only because limitations of space did not and do not now permit an adequate defence of what is currently a profoundly unfashionable view. It was not always so. Before the model of the computer came to dominate philosophical and psychological thinking in this area, it was possible for a philosopher like Ayer (1947, p.7) to declare that 'the process of thought can[not] be validly distinguished from the expression of it'.¹ If that principle is taken seriously, we have to conclude not only that there can be no genuine thought in the case of beings who do not communicate with one another by means of a public language but also that there is no place within science for an explanation which involves attributing thoughts to an agent, unless there are good reasons for thinking that the behaviour to be explained is in fact under verbal control.

If I am not deterred from holding this view by the big battalions arrayed against me, it is partly because, to mix metaphors, this is not the first time that I have been a lone voice crying in the wilderness (Place, 1956). But a more compelling reason for this confidence, is that I can see no other sustainable justification for Skinner's project in constructing a non-mentalistic language for the description and explanation of the behaviour of organisms at the molar level. Since for him Skinner's project has no intrinsic merit to recommend it, it stands or falls for Dennett on the cogency of the reasons given for adopting it. That is a view which I cannot share. It seems to me that the value of Skinner's project has already been amply demonstrated by the results achieved from its application. As is predicted by the theory that mentalistic explanations presuppose verbal control of the behaviour to be explained, these results are most impressive in areas such as animal behaviour and the behaviour of the mentally handicapped, where the behaviour is either entirely or predominantly 'contingency-shaped' and thus uncomplicated by the superimposition of verbal control. I also believe, although here I cannot yet point to any concrete results, that once the defects of Skinner's (1957) initial attempt have been put right (Place, 1982, 1983), behaviour analysis will provide us for the first time with a fully integrated theory of language which incorporates phenomena as the pragmatic as well as the semantic and syntactic levels of analysis,

¹ I am indebted to Mr. Jonathan Cohen of Queen's College, Oxford for drawing my attention to this quotation.

linguistic performance as well as linguistic competence. That, of course, is a confidence that I cannot yet expect other to share. But since my evaluation of Skinner's project does not depend on the reasons he gives for adopting it, I have no wish to join Dennett in urging Skinner to settle for one of the various alternative reasons for repudiating mentalism which he lists in his final paragraph.

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