INTERNATIONAL PEER COMMENTARY

What Went Wrong?

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I find Skinner's *apologia pro vita sua*—for that is what this is—profoundly sad. At the end of a long and uniquely productive career, he finds the science of behaviour to which he has devoted his life and which 30 years ago was at the sharp edge of scientific advance in psychology now almost universally reviled, its few remaining adherents starved of funds for research and, as I have described it elsewhere (Place, 1985),

> *consigned to a kind of academic ghetto—cut off by mutual suspicion and incomprehension, not only from other approaches within psychology, but from virtually every other adjacent discipline from philosophy, linguistics and sociology on the one hand, to ethology and the neuro-sciences on the other.*

What has gone wrong? Skinner identifies three 'obstacles' which have prevented behaviour analysis from achieving the recognition which he thinks it deserves: (1) humanistic psychology, (2) psychotherapy, and (3) cognitive psychology. It seems to me that he is quite right to single out these three factors as the key to the downfall of behaviourism—for let's face it, that's what we are talking about. Where he goes wrong, I suggest, is in failing to appreciate both the magnitude of the reverse that behaviourism has suffered and the nature and strength of the forces that are ranged against him.

Put at its simplest what Skinner is trying to do is to persuade psychologists and other behavioural scientists to stop explaining behaviour, as we do in everyday life, in terms of what the agent knows or believes about the situation confronting him or her, what he or she wants to achieve with respect to that situation and what he or she intends to do about it. In place of that familiar form of explanation we are being asked to substitute an account of behaviour in terms of the principle of the three-term contingency (stimulus, response and reinforcement or, in its more general form, antecedent, behaviour and consequence).

Not surprisingly this proposal encounters considerable resistance. Why should we be compelled to abandon a well-tried way of construing behaviour that is found in every human natural language we know of and which is, doubtless, almost as old as language itself? Skinner claims that such explanations are unscientific and if he

means by that they have not been specially devised by scientists for this purpose he is undoubtedly right. But from the fact that an explanation has not been specially devised by scientists, it does not follow that a scientist who uses such an explanation in a scientific context is thereby betraying his scientific calling. Indeed it was the realisation that computer scientists were using mentalistic language in talking about their machines which more than anything else triggered the cognitive revolution and persuaded a whole generation of psychologists to throw off the uncomfortable conceptual strait-jacket within which the behaviourists, as they saw it, had wanted to confine them.

But it is not just conceptual conservatism that motivates resistance to the conceptual innovations proposed by the behaviourists. In the first place there are the ethical objections which Skinner considers under the heading of 'Humanistic Psychology'. Underlying the philosophical debate concerning the freedom of the human will, there is a deep-rooted moral principle which holds that ultimately the only socially acceptable way of modifying the behaviour of another person is by using rational argument and evidence to change the belief or beliefs on which the decision to act in that way is based. Skinner offends against that moral principle not only by advocating other methods of behaviour modification, but by apparently denying that what someone believes affects how they behave.

A second set of objections to the behaviourist proposals for conceptual innovation are those which Skinner considers under the heading of 'Psychotherapy'. Psychotherapy, as I see it, is a method of behaviour modification which is favoured by therapists, by their clients and by the lay public, not because it is particularly effective in changing the client's behaviour, but, in the case of the therapists and their clients, because of the mutual reinforcement of the behaviour involved which the therapeutic relationship provides for both participants, and, in the case of the lay public, because psychotherapy is the only method of behaviour modification proposed by psychiatrists and psychologists which appears to conform to the moral principle stated above.

But whatever the reason, it is clear that psychotherapy enjoys a public esteem which no other branch of psychology can hope to emulate, with the result that the number of psychologists who have a professional commitment to psychotherapy is both large and extremely influential. This means that there is bound to be a substantial vested interest opposed to the kind of conceptual innovations proposed by the behaviourists. This is not so much because the behaviourist appears to deny a role to the agent's conscious beliefs in the control of behaviour, since in the psychoanalytic tradition, at least, such beliefs are regarded as epiphenomenal with respect to the true determinants of behaviour in the Unconscious. What upsets the psychotherapist is that the behaviourist's conceptual innovations threaten the therapist's all important lines of communication with the client. For the mentalistic language of ordinary discourse is the language that the client speaks and understands. Consequently to require the therapist to abandon this way of construing the situation in his or her own theoretical assessments of what is going on within the therapeutic interview would be to place an unnecessary barrier to the free flow of communication between therapist and client. To complain, as Skinner does, that this

procedure does not conform to the standards of objectivity which are demanded in other sciences is to miss the point. After all, it is only in dealing with the behaviour of human beings that scientists are confronted with an entity that provides its own explanations of its own behaviour and where those explanations, couched in the language of mentalism, are part of the data to which the behavioural scientist must attend.

The sad thing is that, had Skinner been a little less dismissive of, and a little more sensitive to, the reasons for resisting his conceptual proposals, behaviour analysis might have retained the prestige and influence which it had before the cognitive revolution. For he is not really denying the obvious fact that a substantial part of human behaviour is controlled by what the agent believes about the situation confronting him or her. He is simply proposing to re-describe that fact in terms of his notion of 'rule-governed behavior' (Skinner, 1966) where 'a rule' is a verbal formula which is said to 'specify' the contingency confronting the agent ("*what will happen in this situation if I do so-and-so*"). Where he differs from the opposition is in his insistence that there is another form of behaviour which he calls 'contingency-shaped behavior' in which verbal formulations of the prevailing contingencies play no part and which is seen in the behaviour of animals, pre-linguistic children and in the motor and verbal skills of linguistically competent children and human adults.

As I see the matter, the cognitive revolution might never have happened had Skinner realised that the only significant objection to mentalistic explanation of behaviour is that such explanations presuppose that the behaviour to be explained is controlled by a self-directed verbally formulated thought (or 'rule' as he would say) and that the objection only applies to cases where mentalistic explanations are used to account for behaviour that is in fact contingency-shaped rather than rule-governed. Equally, the cognitive revolution might have been averted had he also realised that the reason why computer scientists use mentalistic language to describe the behaviour of their machines is that the now traditional digital computer is designed to carry out quickly and efficiently those computational tasks which human beings carry out slowly and inefficiently, if at all, but which are an integral part of what Skinner calls 'rule-governed behavior'. Perhaps with the advent of the parallel distributed processor, which is designed to carry out tasks like spatial discrimination which human beings (or their brains, if you prefer) carry out quickly and efficiently on the basis of contingency-shaping and whose workings lend themselves much less readily to description in mentalistic terms, the lost years will be recovered and behaviour analysis will resume its rightful place in the scientific community. I sincerely hope so.

References

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