Beyond Pride and Humility

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Every year, at the end of May, the Association for Behavior Analysis indulges itself in an orgy of self-adulation. In an endless series of talks and symposia, we tell ourselves that we do science the right way, we solve problems effectively, we analyze issues clearly because our vocabulary is pure, and we are not misled by pseudoexplanations—unlike psychologists from competing intellectual traditions, of course. And every year, my friend Neuringer and I participate. This is *hubris*, not humility.

When he and I go back to our home institutions, however, we have to talk with colleagues who work in different traditions, and they often have interesting things to say. A prideful behavioral stance could turn them away and keep us isolated, so a degree of humility is an inevitable part of collegiality. Neuringer argues further that humility is functional because it entails tentativeness, openness to criticism, and support for diversity, and I agree. These attributes of humility presumably enhance variation within the behavior analysis community and in the daily professional activities of its individual members. By analogy with evolution, this increases the range of behavior that is available for selection by its consequences, and thus contributes to progress within our field. It also raises the odds on productive interaction with folks who think differently. On the other hand, the lack of humility-induced variation can produce intellectual inbreeding and dogmatic sterility that may trap us in an evolutionary dead end. Although our methods may be adopted by others of a more eclectic bent, pure behaviorism will die, confirming the pronouncements of our obituary writers. So let's hear it for humility.

But *hubris* also has a function. In order to justify my life to my family, my friends, and myself, I need to assert, both publicly

and privately, a few fundamental beliefs: 1) A coherent, quantitative science of behavior is possible; 2) Its findings can be used to promote human wellbeing; 3) The analysis of behavior provides the most effective path to these goals; and 4) I can make a contribution by working within this tradition. Unfortunately, the consequences of what I do in the name of science and human wellbeing are so remote and uncertain that they cannot confirm my beliefs (or, stated otherwise, maintain my behavior). In particular, my laboratory findings often leave me more perplexed than enlightened, and seem likelier to postpone than to promote the possibility of a coherent quantitative science, and my efforts at conceptual extrapolation to global problems of survival and wellbeing usually fail to capture their complexities or to offer realistic solutions. To keep on working, then, I need the relatively immediate reinforcement provided by friends and colleagues, but they cannot provide it unless they share my prideful beliefs.

The construction of a science of behavior may have a lot in common with the construction of a cathedral. Consider the people who actually did the work. The stonemasons who laid the foundation blocks, and even their sons who closed in some of the vaults and arches, could not expect to live long enough to see the cathedral in its completed glory. So why did they labor to shape stones, raise scaffolding, and hoist heavy blocks into place? For daily sustenance and shelter, of course; for the pleasure of communal activity and approval, no doubt; but could any of this have happened if their community did not have faith in a particular god, the One True God of Christianity, and worship that God within a framework of beliefs that guided the community's spiritual practices and excluded unbelievers? I don't think so. Agnostics may be delightful companions but they don't leave cathedrals in their wake.

The analogy between an exclusive faith in the One True God and prideful belief in the doctrines of behavior analysis is, of course, deliberate: The former built cathedrals, and the latter is building a science of behavior. Science, like cathedral-building, is essentially a communal enterprise that operates within a framework of shared practices and goals. Ideologically neutral and eclectic students of behavior who are not constrained by the articles of our creed may add to the diversity and the data of our science, but they are not likely to make enduring systematic contributions.

Commitment to a faith, either religious or behavioral, need not exclude ideas from outside that faith. For example, I doubt that the stonemasons' faith prevented them from adopting new masonry techniques developed by infidels (there's humility-induced openness), but I also doubt that their faith weakened as a result. By analogy, we can acknowledge the importance of so-called cognitive phenomena and study them without losing our faith in an analysis that excludes cognitive explanations. Thus construed, the cathedral metaphor suggests that we stay open to new ideas, whatever their source; that we welcome their proponents into our meetings and journals; and that we keep the faith. Unless we proudly claim possession of a special and exclusive faith, the cathedral may not get built.

So far, I have argued that both pride and humility are functional in our work, but these may not be independent because the behavioral faith that we take pride in also has humbling effects. According to the most central tenets of our creed, all behavior is determined by genetic and environmental processes. Of course, the deterministic view applies to our own behavior as well as to that of our experimental subjects. However much we may experience ourselves as autonomous agents and take pride in our achievements, our actions do not really spring from us as individuals. If anything, they emerge from genetic and environmental processes that are utterly indifferent to our self-styled achievements. There is not much room for personal pride in this view of life, so in that sense a true communi-

cant of the behavioral faith must be humble. Conversely, humility-induced questioning of determinism can lead to personal pride in the origination and ownership of one's work.

In his argument for humility on the issue of determinism, Neuringer discusses randomness in behavior as a problem for determinism. Randomness, in turn, suggests the possibility of an endogenous random generator. But if such a thing exists, it presumably results from evolutionary processes in the same way as, say, the pigeon's sensory-motor apparatus. The pigeon's biology endows it with the ability to peck at local targets, but the actual occurrence and direction of pecking depend on the relations between environmental events. Likewise, Neuringer's own work suggests that the actual occurrence of random behavior—the when and where of it—is determined by external variables. So I suspect that determinism commands his scientific allegiance as well as mine.

The incompatibility between the intellectual commitment to determinism and the private experience of autonomy produces a lot of tension in my life, and I suspect that is true for others as well. I suggested above that both humility and pride are functional in our professional and personal lives, but perhaps that is true only within this state of tension. No doubt a philosophical resolution is possible, but none has seemed entirely satisfying to me. However, there may be a lesson from religious experience on how to resolve the tension between determinism and autonomy. The mystics of all faiths, after years of spiritual effort, sometimes experienced themselves as exalted but passive instruments of the highest power—a state of grace beyond pride or humility. St. Francis did not argue that his was the best way to advance knowledge or to act effectively on behalf of humankind, but simply prayed that he might become an instrument of the Lord's peace and love. Similarly, if we can accept ourselves as instruments of our genetic endowments and our environmental histories, issues of pride and humility will be irrelevant as we get on with our work.