Behavior Analysis Is Not Ultimately About Behavior

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The stimulus-response (S-R) psychology of Watson (1913) is ultimately about behavior and is definitely mechanistic. The behavior-analytic approach of Skinner (1938, 1953) is not ultimately about behavior, and it is definitely not mechanistic. As operant psychologists, we are not concerned with identifying stimuli and responses that bear some fixed relationship to one another and that can be used as building blocks to explain complex behavior patterns. As operant psychologists, we are concerned, first and foremost, with the functions of behavior or, in lay terms, with purpose (Lee, 1988; Morris, 1993; Skinner, 1974), even though we do not analyze and use the term *purpose* as a lay person would.

Each year, I have the pleasure of teaching a course in the principles of psychology to the incoming doctoral students in our clinical program, almost all of whom are cognitively oriented. When I ask them why they reject behaviorism, I am told it is because behaviorism is a mechanistic approach in which people's behavior is conceived of as a marionette that is jerked around by incoming stimuli. The students do not like the S-R approach. I then ask how many of them are interested in the purpose of human behavior and whether they feel that purpose is a noble and critically important topic. All hands go up in agreement. I then point out that the core issue in behavior analysis is purpose. Most people respond that my approach to behaviorism must be idiosyncratic, and that I am surely a prophet ahead of my time. Of course, I am not

ahead of my time; instead, I am solidly in the mainstream of operant behaviorism. In this regard, I believe that the most important point Morris (1993) makes is that many, perhaps most, people who reject behaviorism do so out of ignorance, and that a psychology that emphasizes the study of purpose would be more warmly received than a psychology that emphasizes the study of behavior. As others have pointed out (Lee, 1988), cognitive psychology comes much closer to being the intellectual descendant of S-R behaviorism than does the operant psychology to which we subscribe. Yet cognitive psychology (despite its almost total lack of interest in purpose) is loved and admired by the academic masses while operant psychology is disdained, or worse, ignored (extinction being worse than punishment in my value system). Clearly, there has been a breakdown in the plan of cosmic justice.

What can be done? The answer, I believe, lies in educating people about what contemporary behaviorism is really about. Morris's paper (1993) is an important step in that direction. His paper suggests a course of action that we can follow to achieve our educational goal. Let me try. First, Gertrude Stein said, "A rose is a rose is a rose." She was right about roses but had she said the same thing about behaviorism, she would have been wrong. That is, behaviorism is not behaviorism, by which I mean that S-R psychology is not behavior analysis. Why then must we use the same term for two approaches that have little in common? Functionalism would have been a better term for what we are about but, unfortunately, that term has already been used to describe a school of psychology quite different from ours. My point, though, is that renaming our field to highlight what we really do would probably help remind the world that the study of purpose (which is our aim) has had a long and noble his-

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tory. Further, it would raise a very enjoyable question for our cognitive brethren, namely, "Why don't *you* care about the purpose of human behavior?"

A second and related issue has to do with the fact that true behavior analysts have, paradoxically, very little interest in behavior. Thus, knowing that a young boy diagnosed as autistic exhibits self-injury is, by itself, not very interesting. What is interesting is why the self-injury occurs (i.e., of what variables is it a function). Some self-injury is attention seeking (Lovaas, Freitag, Gold, & Kassorla, 1965), some is escape motivated (Carr, Newsom, & Binkoff, 1976); some is maintained by tangibles (Durand & Crimmins, 1988), some by sensory reinforcers (Favell, McGimsey, & Schell, 1982), and some by endogenous opiates (Cataldo & Harris, 1982). To repeat a theme, self-injury is not self-injury. Topography (behavior) does not matter much; function (purpose) does. Further, many different topographies (e.g., self-injury, aggression, verbal abuse, sarcasm, singing obscene songs) may all serve the same purpose (e.g., attention seeking). Therefore, again, behavior is not the thing of interest to behavior analysts. Many uninformed academicians find this fact surprising. It too raises an interesting question, this time for our DSM-III-loving colleagues, namely, "Why don't *you* care about the purpose of human behavior? Why do *you* devote yourselves to grouping and regrouping behaviors into various clusters and then reifying these clusters by applying a diagnostic label to them? Isn't an obsessive preoccupation with behavior per se something that you accuse behaviorists of?"

Finally, a third issue has to do with unidirectional versus reciprocal causality. As noted before, the stereotype of mechanistic behaviorism is that we behaviorists conceptualize humans as objects to whom we do things (e.g., present discriminative stimuli and reinforcers) and these objects in turn change (i.e., behaviors are altered). Yet, as behavior analysts have grappled with more and more applied areas, they have had to deal with social systems, that is, the issue of reci-

procity. To illustrate from our own work, many children with developmental disabilities exhibit severe problem behavior that needs to be managed. The stereotyped view of the field is that behaviorists see children merely as passive recipients of treatment. Yet, our research has demonstrated that the problem behavior of children has systematic and profound effects on adults who teach the children (Carr, Taylor, & Robinson, 1991). In other words, we are not talking about unidirectional effects but, rather, about child behavior altering adult behavior, and vice versa, in a dynamic ongoing system. Behavior analysis is much more complex than our critics acknowledge or are aware of.

In sum, Morris (1993) is right: Behavior analysis is not mechanistic. It is dynamic and reciprocal, not static and unidirectional. It deals with function and purpose, not topography and structure. If the 20th century is the Age of Anxiety and we are all in danger of tumbling into the existential void, then what more noble an approach could there be than one that emphasizes the study of purpose? We have much to be proud of.

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