Commentary on Malone: Who Founded Behaviorism?

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Abstract Malone (*The Behavior Analyst*, 37, 1–12 2014) argued that the emergence of behaviorism was inevitable with or without Watson’s participation, mainly because protobehavioral ideas and dissatisfaction with classical structuralism were already widespread. However, the first premise is questionable because many of the ideas Malone cited were consistent with structuralism rather than behaviorism, and even if both premises were true they would not make the emergence of behaviorism—or anything else—*inevitable*. Historical evidence for inevitability is always retrospective and therefore always allows the logical fallacy of “after this, therefore because of this.” In the relevant real world Watson existed, he was a psychologist, he was the first to publish an article that described a “behaviorism,” and he promoted his behaviorism in later works. Stories about what would have happened without Watson’s participation are therefore counterfactual and this lack of *historicity* makes the stories fictional rather than scientific. In the real world, Watson founded behaviorism.

Keywords Behaviorism · History · John B. Watson

Malone (2014) asked, “Did John B. Watson Really ‘Found’ Behaviorism?” He answered, “[If] behaviorism can be considered to have been ‘founded,’ Watson best deserves the credit as founder” (p. 10). He did not say why he put “founded” in quotation marks, but the rest of his article implies a reason—to cast doubt on Watson’s role. I examine his main arguments herein, using the relevant everyday meanings of “founder” in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (1998): A *founder* is “one that founds or establishes”; *found* means “to establish (as an institution)” (p. 461); *establish* means “**4 a** : to bring into existence . . . **5 a** : to put on a firm basis” (p. 397). My argument is that Watson was the founder of behaviorism in both senses of *establish*.

The thesis of Malone’s article was that prior trends “made the founding of behaviorism *inevitable* [emphasis added] with or without Watson” (p. 8) and “The time for behaviorism

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had come and Watson was the advocate to announce its arrival and to defend it” (p. 11). Malone based the alleged inevitability mainly on two trends. One was earlier uses of protobehavioral concepts and processes by writers such as William Carpenter, Alexander Bain, and Sigmund Freud. (Malone mentioned a few others, but without as much elaboration.) The other trend was an increasing number of published criticisms of the classical introspectionist psychology of consciousness (structuralism). These trends seem to me slender bases to support inevitability, which is also called inexorability and inescapability (Schultz and Schultz 1992, p. 261) and unavoidability.

Protobehaviorists

Regarding the first trend, I found that the nineteenth century textbooks and the histories of psychology on my bookshelves seldom mentioned Carpenter, and those that did cited only mentalistic ideas. Malone cited alleged examples of Carpenter’s protobehavioral concepts, but some were mentalistic rather than behavioral. Examples are “the personal habit of duty or obligation” and “will power,” which are not prototypical of habits defined behaviorally as stimulus–response relations. Bain was also not much of a precursor because he strongly emphasized mental contents and mental activities (Kantor 1969, p. 314, listed him as a mentalist).

Malone also asserted that Freud’s pre-1923 writings were “quite behavioral” (footnote 8, p. 7) and that “Freud’s chief contribution was the demonstration that conscious awareness was not very important in psychology” (p. 7). Actually, Freud’s writings before 1923 were quite *nonbehavioral*. Examples are evident in the published version of five lectures Freud gave at a September 1909 meeting at Clark University. The published version was in the April 1910 *American Journal of Psychology* (Freud 1910); it is certainly one of Freud’s pre-1923 writings, it was undoubtedly available to Watson, and therefore I see no reason to cite herein any later work by Freud.

Freud’s key concepts in 1910 included *libido*, which meant “sexual pleasure” (p. 209) and “erotic need” (p. 214) but also a process that, for example, “succeeds by means of regression in revivifying the infantile wishes and so producing a neurosis” (p. 214). Other key concepts included *repression*, *sublimation*, and *transference* (*Übertragung*), which were names of supposed mental processes, and *unconscious impulses*, which were inferred mental entities. Watson (1912b, p. 916) cited “such terms as ‘suppression,’ ‘substitution,’ ‘symbolism,’ ‘latent’ and ‘manifest’ content, ‘psychic censors,’ and the like” (all explicit or implicit in Freud 1910) and said “such phenomena when rightly understood are statable in terms of present-day psychology—in terms of memory processes, retention, habit formation, habit conflicts, etc.” (p. 916); “present-day psychology” meant “objective” psychology (especially clear in Watson 1912a). In other words, the direction of influence Watson envisioned was from behaviorism to Freud rather than vice versa. A concrete instance is that Watson and Morgan (1917) borrowed the name *transference*, or *transfer*, from Freud’s word *Übertragung*, but they gave it a broader definition that made Freud’s narrow meaning explainable as a stimulus–response association.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I would note that the translatability of Freud’s concepts into behavioral terms does not indicate that his concepts were already behavioral or even protobehavioral, and doing the translations does not make Freud’s

theory behavioral or protobehavioral. His theory is mentalistic and a behavioral translation does not change that fact—it creates a new theory that arguably should be credited to the translator. Concrete cases are Watson and Morgan’s new behavioral concept of transfer and Dollard and Miller’s (1950) translation of Freudian theory into a new behavior theory of personality.

Another point is that contrary to Malone’s contention, conscious awareness was vitally important in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and method of therapy. The goal of psychoanalysis was to remove the negative consequences of *unconscious* impulses by inducing the patient to make the impulses *conscious*. A related point is that Malone said Freud conceptualized *unconscious* not as a repository but as a type of mental content or process, specifically a mental content or process that occurs without a person’s awareness. The grammatical difference is use as a noun to designate a locus versus use as an adjective to designate a quality. Freud (1910) used both meanings—for *conscious* as well as *unconscious*—though without formal definitions. Three examples, among many, are: “forgotten memories . . . hindered from becoming conscious [adjective], and forced to remain in the unconscious [noun] by some sort of force” (Freud 1910, p. 192); “drag up into consciousness [noun] the forgotten experience which was present in the unconscious [noun]” (p. 197); and “the unconscious [noun] makes use of a sort of symbolism” (p. 203). A fourth example is an anecdote in which the analogues of conscious and unconscious were explicitly locations—inside and outside a lecture hall (pp. 194–195). Freud (1910) extended his theory beyond neuroses to unconscious contents and processes in everyday life, such as slips of the pen and the tongue, dreams, and *déjà vu*, *déjà raconté*, and other sorts of “already.”

Malone used the alleged protobehavioral trend in a thought experiment (not his term) in which a stranger confronts a female on campus and asks about “the way we work.” Her answer is detailed, coherent, and intelligent, and it is behavioral–psychological rather than cognitive–psychological, physiological, philosophical, or humanistic. Malone said her answer “simply echoes the doctrines of a host of writers . . . many decades before Watson’s 1913 manifesto” (p. 6), but I would note that it also faithfully echoes Watson’s doctrines. The problem is that a “thought experiment” is really only a “thought” because real experiments occur not just in the mind but in real actions done in a real environment. Not all real experiments confirm the researcher’s expectation, but I have never read a thought experiment that failed to confirm its author’s expectation.

Disgruntlement and Revolution

Regarding the second trend that Malone cited, I would note that disgruntlement about the status quo is just that—disgruntlement—and only in retrospect can it be seen to have been followed by a revolution, or only by more disgruntlement or nothing noteworthy. Given that historical evidence for an alleged instigation of revolution is retrospective, the allegation can be, but not always is, an instance of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*—“after this, therefore because of this.” The fallacy is taking an antecedent–consequent relation to be a causal relation; it is a fallacy because antecedents can include conditions required for the operation of a cause (Werkmeister 1948, pp. 51–52). For example, Watson’s publishing of “Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It” in 1913 is an undisputed historical event and it was followed by an undisputed series of events—publications

by Watson that advanced his behaviorism by elaborating and contretizing the 1913 article. This antecedent–consequent relation is not an instance of the fallacy because the sequence consists of works by Watson himself. However, saying that Watson was the founder of behaviorism in the later and broader sense could be an instance; this issue is discussed in the section on Historicity.

Statements by Burnham (1968), who also saw inevitability, and Schultz and Schultz (1992, p. 286) are further instances of the fallacy. Analyzing them is instructive about Malone's arguments, but herein I analyze only the more recent one. Schultz and Schultz said that "by the time Watson set to work on behaviorism," trends toward pervasive influence of "objectivism, mechanism, and materialism . . . led inexorably to a new kind of psychology The science of behavior, which viewed the human being as a machine, was the inescapable result" (pp. 260–261) and "The notion that psychology should be the science of behavior was already gaining adherents. Watson's greatness was not in being the first to propose the idea but seeing, perhaps more clearly than anyone else, what the times were calling for. He responded vigorously and articulately as the agent of a revolution whose inevitability and success were assured because it was already underway."

The trends Schultz and Schultz cited were arguably not *causes* of the revolution but *conditions* that made Watson's efforts causally effective. If a revolution is already under way in a real world, it is of course inevitable in that world in the sense that it is actually happening there. However, the revolution under consideration could be said to have led to functionalism rather than directly to behaviorism. Schultz and Schultz (ibid.) said that functionalism influenced Watson's work on behaviorism (p. 260), but its main influences on Watson were in features that he rejected. In the 1913 behaviorist manifesto, Watson criticized functionalism for being indecisive about structuralism; for example, he said that functionalists change mental terms such as perception and emotion by using adjectival forms followed by the word "process," which "serves in some way to remove the corpse of 'content' and to leave 'function' in its stead" (p. 165). "I feel that *behaviorism* is the only consistent and logical functionalism" (p. 16; his italics). Both functionalism and Watson's other *bête noire*, structuralism, persisted for decades after Watson's (1913) attack, but both eventually fizzled out. Thus, the success of a revolution is revealed only retrospectively, and contrary to Schultz and Schultz the fact that a revolution is under way does not make its success inevitable.

Historicity

Historicity means "historical actuality" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 1998, p. 550). Traditionally, a history separates truth from fiction, first by research to find facts and then by judgment of their reliability (Cohen 1955, p. 112; "History" 1952, p. 711; Nagel 1952/1953). A fact is reliable, or true, if it meets the criterion required by the theory of truth being used. Examples are consistency with a relevant network of facts and axioms (coherence), empirical confirmation (correspondence), and successful working (pragmatic truth) (Pepper 1942). Of course, satisfying such a criterion does not establish that a "true fact" is an *absolute truth*, forever indisputable; rather, it establishes only that calling the fact true is justified until it is convincingly contradicted. Wells (1920) implied the point in characterizing history as "an attempt

to tell, truly and clearly, . . . the whole story . . . *in so far as it is known to-day*” (p. v; emphasis added). Any specific history has *historicity*, then, if its facts are presently true. Conversely, it lacks historicity if some of its facts become false or are already known to be false.

Some counterfactual histories are entertaining or even fascinating, in my opinion, but they are fictional rather than scientific because they lack historicity. They are a sort of *speculative argument* and as such they can be used to suggest what *might be* true, but not to establish what *is* true (Werkmeister 1948, pp. 64–65). For example, Malone (p. 2) said behaviorism would have inevitably arisen even if Watson had become a medical doctor instead of a psychologist. In the real world, the closest Watson came to being a medical doctor seems to have been in a 1926 article in which the byline was “JOHN B. WATSON, PH.D., M.D.” (Watson 1926b; without “M.D.” in a similar article, Watson 1926a). Malone’s justifiable conclusion is therefore only that behaviorism *might have arisen* without Watson’s participation.

In summary, stories in which certain trends led inevitably to behaviorism, thus making Watson’s contribution incidental, lack historicity. In the era that includes the emergence of behaviorism, no real world existed in which Watson did not found behaviorism, because no real world existed in which Watson was not a psychologist, did not publish his 1913 behaviorist manifesto and later works promoting his behaviorism, did not influence other psychologists and psychology students to endorse behaviorism, and so forth. Also, no real world existed in which the cited trends induced anyone other than perhaps Watson to found behaviorism. I say “perhaps Watson” because although we know that in the real world Watson founded behaviorism, we do not know whether the cited trends had any role.

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