

THE PARADOXICAL POWER OF BEHAVIORISM

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John Watson's behaviorist approach to psychology was radical within the field but fit the emerging cultural milieu of the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. The scientific and industrial revolution was transforming the world. Part of this transformation was that science was put to practical purposes.

If we look at Fancher and Rutherford's (2012) exegesis of the history of psychology we see in the last decades of the nineteenth century an effort to transform psychology from the realm of meta-physics to physics, from philosophy to natural science. The scientific approach formulated in Europe by Wilhelm Wundt came to the US through his student, Edward Titchener. William James published his *Principles of Psychology* articulating a scientific approach that rejected meta-physics. The two schools were dissimilar but remained theoretical in orientation. Behaviorism was different. It operated in accordance with strict scientific principles but it had immediate practical benefits. John Watson said the purpose of psychology was not to explain human behavior but to control it. He stated human behavior could be altered in predictable ways. Equally radical was his position that psychology was defined by behavior and any consideration of consciousness was irrelevant. Both were not only radical but also revolutionary.

Behaviorism closely adhered to the scientific principles of the physical sciences. All experiments were strictly defined, monitored and measured. All were repeatable and results could be consistently confirmed. Unlike structuralism and functionalism interpretation was not needed. Behaviorism established the fundamental principles of controlled research confirmed by replication. These have dominated scientific psychology ever since.

What immediately attracted great numbers of Americans to behaviorism? Why would someone like Abraham Maslow find it so alluring? I believe the answer to this lies in a view of American cultural history eloquently articulated by Jackson Lears (2009). Lears' central argument is that since the end of reconstruction American cultural history is built on class warfare, those with economic power have been and are intent on manipulating and controlling the American public to concentrate wealth and power in their hands. Part of the control is to prevent the public from being aware it is being manipulated. Late in the nineteenth century Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911,2006) embraced radical management principles whose goal was to make each economic activity a managed, controlled action that required no human initiative to implement. The intent was to make the workman as interchangeable as the interchangeable parts in a manufactured product. Taylor's principles were enthusiastically embraced by industrialists despite the fact that as articulated they did not work (Lears, 2009).

How might scientific principles resolve this problem? Might this new-fangled scientific psychology provide help? Andrew Carnegie would not find much use in either structuralism or functionalism to keep wages low and production high in his steel mills? Nor were they much help to Henry Ford whose assembly lines were explicitly designed to mechanize human labor removing any need for thought on the part of the laborer and, of course, degrading and dehumanizing the workers in the process? John Watson and behaviorism arrived at the perfect moment. The goal of behaviorism was to control human behavior. Equally important, once conditioned the people would be unaware it had occurred. And unlike Taylor's approach, behaviorism worked. The next question is how was the public kept unaware?

J. Walter Thompson did not offer John Watson \$25,000 per year out of charity (Fancher & Rutherford, 2012). Abraham Maslow wrote about Calvin Coolidge being obliged to buy a

new hat, despite not needing it, in order to keep hat workers employed (Hoffman, 1988). When John Watson arrived in the advertising world he brought a scientific approach to a craft whose original purpose was to provide information to potential customers. As advertising became more sophisticated it created a vision of the world, a definition of an improved world, and a consumer based definition of happiness. This vision did not so much dominate American culture as create it (Lears, 1994). What is most important is that in the process a key goal was to implant the belief that this vision was improving the quality of life. Things were better. This was progress. Ultimately Watson's original classical conditioning was improved upon by adding instrumental conditioning. Put the package together and you have the modern American advertising agency.

Though behaviorism was not yet part of it, the cultural transformation of the United States was well established by the beginning of the twentieth century (Lears, 2009). Though Abraham Maslow was born into this environment we still need to ask why behaviorism would be academically attractive to him? Based on limited knowledge from reading Edward Hoffman's biography of Maslow (1988), I sense that he was always the humanist, the warm loving and compassionate human being we know today. At the same time when he was a child the combination of a callous, harsh and cruel mother, an emotionally distant father and social ostracism in school, made him believe he must be wholly self-reliant. His sense of achievement could only come from self-improvement and ultimately self-actualization. In high school we find Maslow reading the fictional stories of Tom Swift and Horatio Alger, stories of self-improvement bringing success. At the same time he read physics and other deeply intellectual books. Upton Sinclair's novels awakened his passionate life long concern with improving the world. Yet somehow through all of this I sense he is locking out his heart and his soul. Somewhere deep inside was the Abraham Maslow who as a child would rescue two defenseless

kittens and who would be moved by the hundreds of choristers and orchestral musicians at Carnegie Hall. When his mother callously killed those kittens, Maslow was being conditioned not by Watson's methods but Skinner's. What you care for and cherish will be taken away. When Maslow discovered Watson's behaviorism it immediately resonated and reinforced the self, the persona, Maslow had created in order to survive. Behaviorism's scientific approach was in harmony with Maslow's natural intellectual instincts. Further it could be used to improve mankind. This fit Maslow's search for ways to improve society. Last it asserted that deep emotional needs were irrelevant allowing Maslow to continue denying the reality of his innate emotional nature.

When Maslow discovered behaviorism he embraced it but ultimately the Maslow of the kittens and Carnegie Hall would not be denied. Moving from his home environment to the academic community of Madison, Wisconsin Maslow first formed a sure sense of efficacy and also found a warm, supportive and embracing social environment. It is interesting that as Maslow slowly moved beyond behaviorism he found it intellectually empty (Hoffman, 1988). I suspect he may just have distilled down to its essentials. As an example, Skinner really can be summed up, "If I do something and like what happens, I will do it again. If I do something and I don't like what happens, I probably won't do it again." This is not quite as intellectually stimulating as quantum mechanics!

Like pop culture psychology has had its fads. For decades behaviorism dominated academic American psychology. Today cognition has swept behaviorism, humanism, and psychoanalysis off the table. Yet conditioning is possibly the most important learning mechanism in all of life. Watson and Skinner asserted, and history has confirmed, that much of conditioned learning cannot be undone. As someone once put it, can you really unlearn riding a

bicycle? The tragedy of behaviorism is that it truly can be used to eliminate freedom of choice. It also anesthetizes human emotions and can be used to destroy much of life's deepest meanings.

All therapy is based on the belief that human behavior can be changed. This was first asserted by John Watson and therefore was its greatest contribution to psychology. Intellectually, despite its fundamental simplicity, in its full formulation behaviorism is a robust, subtle, and powerful type of learning. Like other physical sciences it is consistent and repeatedly demonstrable. The paradox of behaviorism is its great feature the ability to change human behavior is also its most destructive feature. Behaviorism gives us the ability to alter human behavior for the betterment of humanity or for the destruction of free choice and free will. As noted, behaviorism ignores the emotional nature of humanity. To maintain that behaviorism can explain the totality of a human being is folly. However to take the position that behaviorism is irrelevant is equally foolish. As a sharp knife can be a great benefit when skillfully used by a surgeon, it can also cause great harm in the hands of a killer. And the same can be said of behaviorism.

References

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