



Remarks

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REMARKS

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In order to stimulate informal discussion of behaviorism among the readership, we have invited Murray Sidman to let us have his comments on the current scene as a regular feature of this journal. He has accepted. The following remarks constitute the body of what he had to say as discussant for the Symposium on Conceptual Issues in Behaviorism, presented at the convention of the American Psychological Association in Washington, D.C., September, 1976. – Editor

The role of the discussant on occasions like this has never been clear to me. And when the level of the presentations is as high as the ones we have just heard, it is difficult to add anything cogent that has not already been said. The usual ploy in such circumstances is simply to read one's own paper. I am not above doing that, but it was not possible because preparation of the paper I am actually scheduled to give took up all the time I had available. So, I will subject you only to three general reflections.

Here is one reflection: If any science is to continue to produce new and useful knowledge, it must devote a significant effort to self criticism and questioning of its own assumptions, concepts, and methods. Until recently, Behaviorists have done little of this — perhaps the most significant turnabout in this respect was the appearance of Day's journal, *Behaviorism*. Behaviorists have tended mostly to be defensive, responding usually to criticisms from outsiders, often citing the criticisms as irrelevant. But who is in a better position to provide relevant criticisms than Behaviorists themselves? I was glad to see that happening here today.

Realize also, that criticism can take many forms. Day, in his characteristically gentle fashion, couched his within an apparent *defense* of Behaviorism. But he tempered his defense with the reminder that it would have been unnecessary if Behaviorists themselves recognized, and acted upon the recognition, that their concern is more with *controlling* relations than with *causal* relations. This was also a major thrust of Goldiamond's presentation, and again, although he expressed his point in terms of *their* misunderstanding, he was really talking about *our* misunderstanding. Michael wants us to reexamine our own verbal practices, particularly with reference to the relativity of the concepts of reinforcers and punishers, and reinforcement and punishment. His critique was definitely within the family. And Wood is concerned that Behaviorists have begun to forget one of

their most distinctive characteristics — their interpretation of behavioral laws as descriptions of the experimenter's interaction with his subjects. It is important that we continue to treat the observer as part of the behavioral system, and that we continue to reinforce each other for doing so; if we do not, the rest of the verbal community will shape that behavior right out of us.

Whether one agrees or disagrees, partially or completely, with the points that have been raised, it is important for all of us to recognize that these issues are of concern to intelligent and thoughtful *colleagues*, who are worried by inadequacies and inconsistencies they have observed within their own and our own approach to the study of behavior. Let us not be hasty, either in disagreement or agreement; thoughtful criticism deserves thoughtful consideration. And above all, let us not be defensive; thoughtful criticism is also an act of friendship.

A second reflection: A central issue here today has been the need to specify behavioral history if one is to explain current behavior. Abundant evidence has long been available to demonstrate that the future course of behavior cannot be predicted from a description merely of its current state and its current environment. One must also know the program which brought the behavior about, and the past controlling relations of which the behavior has been a component.

Evidence that the *same* behavior may be brought about by different programs, and *different* behavior by the same program, has been a central concern of cognitive theory, and in particular, of information processing theory. Now, one may be unhappy with the formulations of cognitive theory — with the conception of the behaving organism as an active modifier of controlling relations — but this is not sufficient reason for dismissing the *problems* with which such theory is attempting to deal. The problems are real, and the criticism that behaviorists generally neglect them is justified. There are areas, in other words, in which Behaviorism should put its own house in order before tearing down its neighbors' houses. It was good to see some beginnings of such housecleaning being attempted here today.

And finally, a third reflection has to do with the description of stimulus control. It is an oversimplification to classify stimulus control merely as the third term of a reinforcement contingency. (It is even less appropriate when we are dealing with supraordinate stimuli — instructions, conditional relations, setting events, absent stimuli.) Reinforcement never establishes stimulus control; it perpetuates a controlling relation which has already occurred for other reasons. The problem here is that we can never *see* a controlling relation, with surety. We can only infer its existence, actuarially and *post hoc*, after a number of instances have permitted us to rule out other controlling relations. Relevant to this was Day's point that any given instance of observation is private.

This inability to visualize any individual instance of stimulus control has given rise directly to many of the explanatory fictions of Cognitive theory. But more to the point, it has also tempted many nominal Behaviorists into the same path, thereby diluting the consistency and elegant simplicity of behavioristic formulations and exposing Behaviorists to the very criticisms we apply to others. "Stimulus generalization" cannot explain what psycholinguists call "generative language"; "selective attention" is just another name for "stimulus processing"; the concept of the "coding response" is an awkward attempt to transform an unobservable instance of a controlling stimulus-

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response *relation* into an observable *response*; and the recent recognition that stimulus-stimulus relations do not require a mediating response has caused confusion among behaviorists, instead of leading them to recognize that elimination of the stimulus-response fiction in the description of stimulus control is the opening wedge for behavioristic formulations in previously inaccessible areas — in particular, language comprehension, logical induction, nonverbal thinking, and perhaps even intellectual and esthetic creativity.