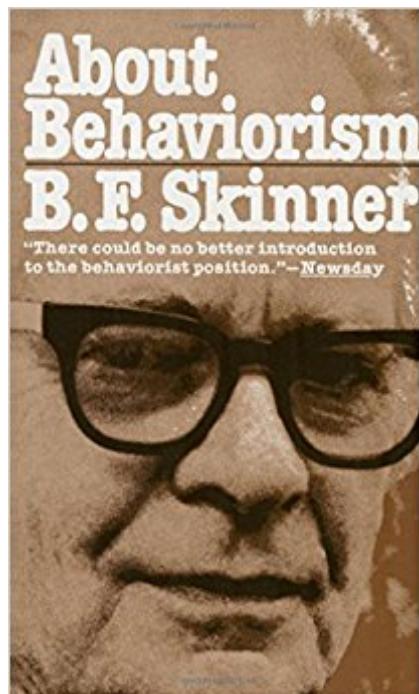


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About Behaviorism



Synopsis

The basic book about the controversial philosophy known as behaviorism, written by its leading exponent. Bibliography, index.

Book Information

Mass Market Paperback: 291 pages

Publisher: Vintage; 1 edition (February 12, 1976)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0394716183

ISBN-13: 978-0394716183

Product Dimensions: 4.2 x 0.8 x 6.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 29 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #47,561 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #38 in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Movements > Behaviorism #56 in Books > Science & Math > Behavioral Sciences > Behavioral Psychology #161 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Mental Health > Emotions

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"A much more effective work than Beyond Freedom and Dignity precisely because it takes more seriously the tradition (or the historical prejudices) of its opposition."-- Robert Kirsch, Los Angeles Times "About Behaviorism is an opportunity to match wits with one of the great men of psychology and to participate in some of its great debates."-- James B. Rule, Newsday "The battle over Skinner's ideas is just beginning. It promises to be one of the most interesting contests of our generation."-- Gail Boyer, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The basic book about the controversial philosophy known as behaviorism, written by its leading exponent. Bibliography, index.

B. F. Skinner had a profound effect on thinking in psychology. His work in experimental analysis of behavior set the foundation for a modern understanding of human behavior and the development of a methodology and scientific approach to behavior change now exemplified in applied behavior analysis the one proven approach to helping people with disorders like autism. His work is also the foundation for some modern approaches to psychotherapy such as acceptance and commitment

therapy. Despite these contributions most people including people trained in psychology seem to misunderstand or distort Skinner's work. The book while not an easy read is something I think anyone who thinks they are serious about understanding human behavior should read.

"About Behaviorism" explicates Skinner's radical behaviorism with clarity and cogency. But make no mistake - this book is no breeze, particularly to those who are unfamiliar with behaviorism and its experimental nuances. I would recommend reading this book in conjunction with Skinner's other work - "science and human behavior", as well as obtaining a modicum of knowledge concerning operant conditioning prior to tackling this work. Grasping the principal facets of Skinner's brand of behaviorism is easier said than done for the behaviorist neophyte: the fact that Skinner articulates his ethos in non-scientific 'readable' terms simplifies the language but not the ideas. As for the work itself, Skinner embarks on a thorough and seminal examination of human behavior in "About Behaviorism." Skinner describes behavior as occurring through a causal chain of physical and putatively mental events. A physical event (contact with a hot stove) produces a mental event (the tactual sensation of 'pain') which in turn produces another physical event (recoiling away from the heat). Unlike other behaviorist models, Skinner's radical behaviorism does not discount 'mental' events as 'unobservable' or 'subjective', but merely disputes that they are 'mental'. Moreover, the putative mental events which produce actions must not simply be discounted because they lack an objective framework. Such an approach nurtures the fictive mentalist depictions of the internal events antecedent to observable behavior. Radical behaviorism countenances the existence of the private events within the skin, challenges the nature of those events as 'mental', and illuminates the misleading manner in which the internal observer - the individual who 'feels' and 'thinks' - characterizes and reports such events. One important distinction Skinner introduces is between contingencies of survival and contingencies of reinforcement. Contingencies of survival consist of activity integral for organisms' survival (eating, breathing, sleeping, etc.). Contingencies of reinforcement refers to events that occur after behavior which by virtue of their consequences increase the probability that the behavior will occur again. Training a dog to 'sit' for a treat represents a classic case of 'conditioning', and the dog treat comprises the contingency that subsequently reinforces the behavior of 'sitting'. The error that often occurs is to then claim that the dog will then sit because of some 'instinct' or 'because he is hungry.' The dog's hunger is clearly collateral to the true cause of the behavior - the contingency. Skinner's behaviorist model adopts this reasoning towards the environmental contingencies which engender human behavior. Just as it is erroneous to conclude that a dog's hunger causes it to sit, so too is it inaccurate to explain that a

man goes to watch a baseball game because "he feels like it," "thinks it's a good idea," or is merely "bored." All such explanations exclusively rely on internal events within the man's skin and belie the true causality that produces the behavior. Conventional language couches what we call emotions, desires, and most importantly - choices, in vernacular that dissemble the true character of the events occurring - in Skinner's words - "within our skin." When a lovelorn individual longs for an unreciprocated romance, he might state that 'lovesickness' causes his despondency. But as Skinner correctly asserts, descriptions of such feelings or emotions invoke 'private stimuli.' But it is the 'public stimuli' - the absence of the reinforcing contingency of the amorous behavior, that properly captures the external referent which causes both emotion and behavior. Thus when someone gets pricked by a needle, it is erroneous to report one's wincing as caused by the 'pain'. 'Pain' is an internal event, and a physiological phenomenon chosen by natural selection because of its worth in arranging an organisms' negative reinforcement of contingencies inimical to survival. However, the most complex human behavior dulls Skinner's otherwise incisively analytical blade. The explanatory power of Skinnerian behaviorism is most problematic when the supposed contingencies that determine the subject's behavior come not from outside the skin, but from the subject himself. Our deepest cognition, conceptualizations, and quantitative reasoning - our most abstract ideations as to ontology, physics, and value - our most sophisticated social interactions, are not so easily elucidated by the behaviorist explanation. This does not mean the theory is false whatsoever - it simply points out that beyond the rudimentary Pavlovian level of stimulus and response - one must acknowledge that the fullest means to understand who we are come not from a facile glance at our external environmental contingencies, but from understanding the neuropsychological contingencies that we ourselves produce "within the skin." These contingencies may not be mental, but they are contingencies of behavior nonetheless. Daniel Dennett in "Consciousness Explained" has much to say on this matter. And while one cannot start the inquiry with such a Cartesian analysis in understanding our behavior, it is an intermediary in the great chain of stimulus and response that should not be skipped. Why do we daydream? Why do we philosophize? Neuropsychologists would assert that such exercises involve cerebral reproduction of information that have been mentally perceived, assimilated, and related in a Humean associationistic manner. This cerebral reproduction itself - although initially derived from an external stimulus - comprises a contingency that I'm not sure Skinner adequately analyzes. Even if one's most personal dreams, visceral emotions, innermost thoughts, and 'mental' ratiocinations are verbal reports not of internal cognitive events but external environmental contingencies, to explain this behavior by simply stating that it occurs because its personally and self reinforcing offers limited

understanding. Skinner's behaviorism can easily explain why a man avoids the bad part of town when he walks to work, but this reductionist account becomes unfalsifiable philosophy when it tackles the most sophisticated, non-social, and meditative manifestations of cognition and language. Certainly, the neuropsychologist, linguist, and even philosopher offer understandings just as if not more valuable in characterizing this behavior. To illustrate, what contingency accounts for the mental imaging and defining of our most unconscious daydreams? For more on this debate, particularly within the behaviorist position on language, one should check Noam Chomsky's criticism of behaviorism as well as the subsequent behaviorist response by Nathan Stemmer. This is not to say that Skinner's theory is wrong, but merely elicits the deeply complex 'physical' causality at play. Skinner himself admits the shortcomings of the behaviorist position in explaining such behavior. This book merely questions the more untenable explanations of behavior and delves deeply into the problem of prescribing 'causal' descriptions of human behavior. Thus the soundness of Skinner's approach lay in his modesty to consign explanations to a description of the contingency: NOT to recklessly postulate that the reason for the contingency's effect is a genetic prescription or environmental process without scientific substantiation of such a claim. But while spiritualisms and idealisms alike cringe at the implicit concept that humans do not possess free will, Skinner correctly recognizes the mentalist sophistry of attributing causation to everything else but our own minds. When one asks why another did not go to work today, to answer that it is because someone "makes a choice" is to give no answer at all. It is a meaningless explanation without any causal foundation and scientific worth. It therefore must be abandoned. Ultimately, Skinner's antiseptic approach to the underlying reasons behind who humans are and why they act draws unfriendly and unfair fire from many. Indeed, the subject of human behavior has been plagued by human pride and ideological dogma. Others may doubt that this reductionist scheme can account for the more opaque and complex aspects of human behavior, and indeed, it seems strangely and simultaneously myopic and farsighted to explain abstract and cognitively internal verbal assertions through the prism of conditioning and contingencies of reinforcement. Still others have identified the tautological absurdity of human behavior deeming itself unfree and governed by environmental contingencies outside of its own control. The point is this: for any philosopher, social scientist, and psychologist who aims to assert that human language, cognition, and behavior represents something more than the offspring of natural selection and environmental contingencies - Skinner is the mountain that must be climbed, his views must be addressed, and the behaviorist position must be accounted for. Are we simply neurons firing, a highly sophisticated materialization of stimulus and response, and a more complex version of environmental conditioning? Even if behaviorism

might fall short in fully explaining human behavior, it has addressed a subject of insuperable complexity. Objectivity evaporates when human behavior examines itself. Thus if the behaviorist lens is not a scientifically valid 'mirror' through which to examine the behavior humans, it is because no framework is valid and any study of human behavior falls to paradox and subjectivity. The greater point that Skinner asserts however, is that it achieves an understanding far more sound than Cartesian mentalism and associated conceptualizations of human behavior. An exceptional book, and if one is - like me - not fully convinced that the reductionist behaviorist model can account for verbal and mental behavior, then I also recommend reading Daniel Dennett's physicalist exposition of consciousness and mind to enhance the behaviorist explanation of mental behavior.

This is basically a perfect book in that it does exactly what it advertises: tells you about behaviorism. So if you're curious about behaviorism, get it. The book is a little small though, with uncomfortable margins. If you're like me, you came with a loose understanding of what Behaviorism was about, i.e. explaining human behaviors on their own terms without presupposition of internal states, etc. Some interesting finer points of the theory exist too though; for example, Skinner portrays himself as applying Darwinist principles to individual behavior -- natural selection is to variations in a species as operant conditioning is to individual behaviors. So that in itself is pretty interesting, and the book itself is quite worth reading, though occasionally extremely hard to get through because Skinner's determination to avoid 'mentalistic' vocabulary (e.g. 'think,' 'intend,' etc.) leads to some very convoluted sentences. Overall it has some good insights and would certainly be an interesting view to keep in mind; expectedly, some of the famous criticisms seem correct, and some (Chomsky's) are more famous than they are conclusive. Skinner also engages with Freud in somewhat interesting ways.

Skinner's **ABOUT BEHAVIORISM** is both his most broad and his most concise work; working as both a rebuttal to behaviorism's critics and a guide to its core principles, this book should be a part of every psychologist's library. Regardless of your theoretical orientation, this book presents the best quick-reference to this ideology. If you don't care for Skinner, I think this is still worthy of reading for the sheer number and quality of ideas developed here. There's much to think about and dwell on. **ABOUT BEHAVIORISM** covers nearly all topics of behavior (including language, reasoning, and sleep) and explains them in parsimoniously behaviorist terms. This book comes across as Skinner's case to the world that this science matters. Behaviorism, as it is presented here, is less concerned collection of terms or explanations, but more of a philosophy of how behavior

should be interpreted and understood. There are times when Skinner comes across as caustic and bitter, and I'm not quite sure this book would jive well with people not already at least somewhat familiar and receptive with classical or operant conditioning. Skinner made a point to not dumb or water things down, so I don't know how well someone not familiar with the core principles and jargon of psychology would receive this. I would recommend this, however, to anyone wanting a good overview of what behaviorism has to offer, and I think this would be a great book to use in a psychology course focusing on Learning (along with say, Karen Pryor's "Don't Shoot the Dog!: The New Art of Teaching and Training"). If you have been interested in understanding what the fuss about Skinner is, this is the book for you.

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