

The Skinner-Rogers Debate

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Public debates between people holding different points of view on topics of importance to a scientific discipline have a long and distinguished history. Because the debates typically are between articulate people with strongly held points of view, they sometimes become acrimonious. Charles Darwin was notoriously reticent to engage his critics in public, but his colleague, the anthropologist Thomas Huxley (grandfather of Aldous, who wrote *Brave New World*) relished the opportunity to champion Darwin's ideas in the public arena. During a famously acrimonious debate with Huxley in 1860, the cleric and Darwin thorn-in-the-side William Wilberforce ended his comments by asking Huxley if he considered himself descended from an ape through his grandmother or grandfather. Huxley replied:

[A] man has no reason to be ashamed of having an ape for his grandfather. If there were an ancestor whom I should feel shame in recalling, it would be a MAN, a man of restless and versatile intellect, who, not content with an success in his own sphere of activity, plunges into scientific questions with which he has no real acquaintance, only to obscure them by an aimless rhetoric, and distract the attention of his hearers from the real point at issue by eloquent digressions, and skilled appeals to religious prejudice."

Ouch.

Although not a debate in the formal sense Ivan Pavlov and Vladimir Bechterev clashed over several issues, culminating in a disagreement over whether or not a conditioned salivary response eliminated by ablation of a particular cortical site could be reestablished following recovery from the ablation surgery. Bechterev said it was not possible, Pavlov said it was. Bechterev took two dogs so treated to a public demonstration during a meeting of the Russian Society of Physicians, where one of Bechterev's students showed that neither of two dogs with the brain area in question removed showed a conditioned response. "Not so fast," said Pavlov (or words to that effect, anyway), who went to the demonstration area at the front of the room and proceeded to classically condition the salivary response of both dogs. The crowd must have gone crazy (Well as crazy as a room of early 20th century Russian physicians can go).

Ouch.

Some time later, the hot topic in psychology was behaviorism, and its status drew British psychologist William McDougall into a debate with the father of behaviorism-cum-wall street advertising exec John B. Watson. On February 5, 1924 at the psychology club in Washington, D. C., McDougall began modestly enough by observing

that he “would begin by confessing that in this discussion I have an initial advantage over Dr. Watson, an advantage which I feel to be so great as to be unfair; namely, all persons of common-sense will of necessity be on my side from the outset, or at least as soon as they understand the issue.” Only the ignorant could miss the wisdom of his words. Hello circularity, good-bye objectivity. It is said that a vote was taken at the end of the debate to determine the winner. McDougall claimed unfairness because the famously handsome Watson won over all the swooning young ladies present.

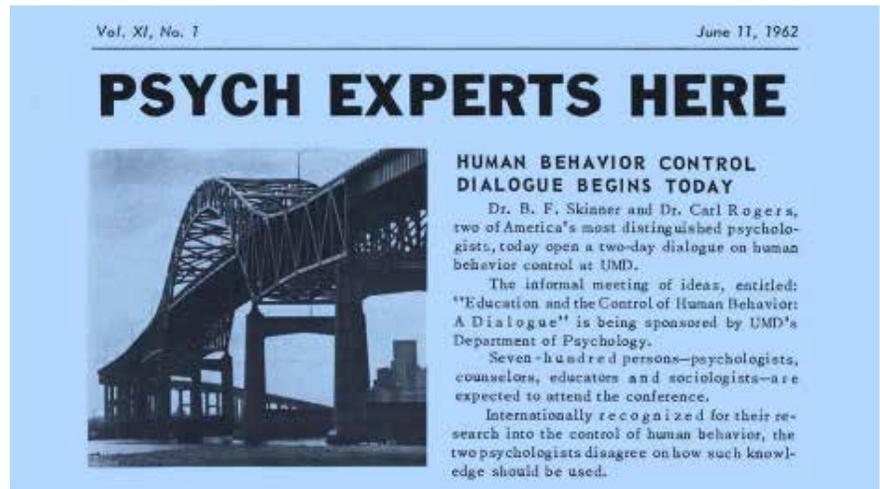
Hmmm.

Fast forward to the 1960s, when Skinnerian behaviorism was in its heyday. Emerging from the dark shadows of existentialism blended with other concerns of “personal growth” at around this same time is psychology’s Third Force (after Freudian and behavioristic psychology), humanistic psychology, personified by Abraham Maslow (himself earlier of the behavioristic persuasion) and always reflective Carl Rogers. The debate occurred in 1962 over two days at the University of Minnesota at Duluth. Reportedly, more than a thousand people attended the event.

You can hear the whole thing right here: [B. F. Skinner - Carl Rogers Dialogue Debate \(1976\) - YouTube](#). Skinner starts his introductory remarks with a couple of humorous remarks, and a good story. After that, things get serious and the debate is lively, but with Carl Rogers as one of the participants, it probably would be too much to expect fireworks of the sort displayed by Wilberforce and Huxley.

How do you feel about humanistic psychology?

Of course, an equally important debate - that never happened - was between Noam Chomsky and Skinner. Chomsky’s scathing but often misguided attack (no other word works here) on behaviorism not even disguised as a review of Skinner’s book *Verbal Behavior*. As the debate with Rogers illustrated, as well as his incisive comments on many topics in many forums, Skinner certainly was willing to engage his critics. He nonetheless famously never responded in writing or in person to Chomsky. Skinner’s most renowned champion in taking on Chomsky was Kenneth MacCorquodale, who wrote two pieces addressing Chomsky’s criticisms, but was 7 years after the original review, and it was preaching to the choir because the retort appeared in the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*. The impact of the Chomsky-Skinner non-debate is still today the subject of debate among those who enjoy debating such things.



B. F. Skinner - Carl Rogers Dialogue Debate (1976)