

HOW THOUGHTS SURVIVE

Geir Overskeid¹

Department of Psychology, University of Oslo

ABSTRACT B. F. Skinner’s radical behaviorism has been intellectually important, yet its long-term survival is uncertain. This paper examines challenges currently facing radical behaviorism and draws lessons from the historical trajectory of functionalism, a school of thought that became highly influential through its assimilation into mainstream psychology. The discussion examines Skinner’s approach in *About Behaviorism* and explores the role of open intellectual exchange in advancing scientific ideas. The marketplace of ideas is presented as both an opportunity and a challenge, emphasizing the importance of effective communication and engagement beyond the behaviorist community. Ultimately, the paper suggests that the integration of Skinner’s best ideas into mainstream psychology could secure their place in the field, even if radical behaviorism as a distinct school may fade, as have other schools of thought.

Keywords: B. F. Skinner, radical behaviorism, functionalism, marketplace of ideas

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Invitations to discuss a book by B. F. Skinner aren’t issued every day. Perhaps they should be, however, for there is much to discuss—and, as *About Behaviorism* enters its fifty-first year, it is an excellent choice.

Skinner writes “Behaviorism is not the science of human behavior; it is the philosophy of that science” (1974, p. 3). In other words, if *About Behaviorism* is about behaviorism, it should be a book about philosophy of science. But is it?

“Behold the beginning of philosophy!” declares Epictetus, the Greco-Roman philosopher (ca. 108/1998, p. 279), as he elaborates on what that beginning entails: “a recognition of the conflict between the opinions of men, and a search for the origin of that conflict, and a condemnation of mere opinion ...”

Skinner does indeed recognize that there is conflict among opinions, though he often does not say exactly whom it is that does not agree with him. He also gives a rather unusual reason for not saying, noting (in parentheses)

I express my regrets if the authors would have preferred to be given credit, but I have applied the Golden Rule and have done unto others what I should have wished to have done if I had used such expressions. (Skinner, 1974, p. 19)

Since, in *About Behaviorism*, he tends not to discuss specific arguments or findings by specific authors, it can be argued that Skinner does not, in the words of Epictetus (ca. 108/1998, p. 279), “search for the origin of that conflict.” Instead, it seems as if Skinner is in what another great psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, called “point-scoring mode” (2003, p. 729)—which Kahneman did not feel was fruitful. A case in point may be found on p. 109 of *About Behaviorism*, where Skinner refers to “the extensive experiments

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Geir Overskeid, Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1094 Blindern, 0317 OSLO, NORWAY. Email: geir.overskeid@psykologi.uio.no

by cognitive psychologists on accessibility,” and states that they can all be reinterpreted in a specific way. Skinner does not, however, refer to any actual experiment, nor state exactly why the findings in question can be reinterpreted the way he claims—which makes it difficult for the reader to determine if his claim is valid. This way of writing can also make it seem as if Skinner does not condemn the expression of what Epictetus called “mere opinion (ca. 108/1998, p. 279).

But let us briefly turn to modern authors, and not just to philosophy, but to philosophy of science. Wessells, points out that Skinner

is not a philosopher of science in the traditional sense. He does not address traditional problems such as the nature of scientific laws and the problem of induction. He has never attempted to construct a formal philosophy of science, and he does not employ traditional philosophical methodology. (1987, p. 115)

Still, when an author sets out to write philosophy of science, the expectation may arise that he will engage with central questions in that field, such as Hume's problem, which Pfeifer and Sarkar (2006, p. xvi) describe: “Hume’s problem—how experience generates rational confidence in a theory—has been central to philosophy of science in the twentieth century and continues to be an important motivation for contemporary research ...”

Skinner explains, “Much of the argument [in *About Behaviorism*] goes beyond the established facts. I am concerned with interpretation rather than prediction and control (1974, p. 19)” Since “much of the argument” is interpretation, it would seem that Hume’s problem becomes especially acute. The core of Hume’s problem, after all, is what it takes to trust a theory—in this case, Skinner's theory. *About Behaviorism*, however, contains no real discussion of how “experience,” i.e., empirical data, might affect our confidence in many of his claims.

There is also another reason to consider David Hume. Where the causes of behavior can be found is a question that’s central to Skinner’s behaviorism—and his answer is clear: Behavior is never caused by anything one can reasonably call “mental” (see Skinner, 1974). It might be relevant, then, that Hume, whom Baggini (2018) describes as “arguably the greatest philosopher the West has ever produced” is seen as the person who “developed the empiricist theme by construing causation so as to dismiss mental substance as a causal agent ...” (see Hochberg, 2006, p. 851).

Had Skinner been a philosopher of science, he might have wanted to acknowledge an historical debt to Hume. There is no real indication, however, that Skinner wanted to be a traditional philosopher of science. It might be more accurate to say that in *About Behaviorism*, he is outlining the tenets of a school of thought—radical behaviorism.

Like many concepts, “school of thought” can mean slightly different things in different literatures. Regarding behaviorism as a school of thought, however, is hardly controversial (see, e.g., Schultz & Schultz, 2008)—and Skinner’s radical behaviorism also seems to fit the bill. Schultz and Schultz (2008, p. 22) explain:

The term *school of thought* refers to a group of psychologists who become associated ideologically, and sometimes geographically, with the leader of a movement. Typically the members of a school of thought share a theoretical or systematic orientation and investigate similar problems.

From Eminence to Marginality?

In a *New York Times Magazine* portrait, Rice described Skinner’s position within the field of psychology six years before the publication of *About Behaviorism*:

[I]n a recent survey of department chairmen at American universities Harvard’s Professor Skinner was chosen overwhelmingly as the most influential figure in modern psychology. The magazine *Psychology Today* goes further, predicting that “when history makes its judgment, he will be known as the major contributor to psychology in this century.” Skinner, whose business is making predictions, considers this one accurate. (1968, p. 27)

Let's move on to 2004, however, and to Henry L. Roediger, III, who used to be president of the American Psychological Society (APS, today the Association for Psychological Science), and who seems quite well-disposed towards behaviorism (see Roediger, 2004). Yet thirty-six years after Rice (1968), Roediger (2004) wrote "The year 2004 marks the centenary of B. F. Skinner's birth. I doubt that most members of the American Psychological Society (and even a smaller proportion of all psychologists) will pay much attention."

It is worth noting that Roediger is not alone—people who identify as behavior analysts also tend towards pessimism as regards the impact of Skinner's behaviorism in the 21st century. Friman et al. (2013) said "Although behavior analysis thrives, its influence on other fields and the intellectual and popular culture remains mainly slight ... many fields think we are dead."

Sigurðardóttir tried, perhaps, to be hopeful. She shares "the dream with many colleagues of seeing behavior analysis recognized, accepted, credited, well represented, correctly understood and growing," and asks: "Will this remain a dream ... ?" (2014, p. 95).

Like Sigurðardóttir, many behavior analysts seem quite content with the state of behavior analysis *per se*. Yet many may also feel, in the words of Poling that, "[t]here aren't enough of us and we don't have enough power" (2010, p. 7). This is quite easy to understand. After all, most psychologists (and many others) want to understand why people behave the way they do, and how behavior can be changed. But most of them do not subscribe to the tenets set out in *About Behaviorism*. Why not?

Could it be that Shared Beliefs have Hindered Progress?

Could it be that ideas that were once better than the prevailing ones might eventually hinder progress? A tentative answer might be: Perhaps—if the ideas in question are not continually debated and criticized, and revised if needed. Moreover, could the risk of a standstill be greater if those ideas are shared by a group, perhaps especially a group that may feel attacked and misunderstood?

Open debate and freedom to choose one's methods of inquiry have contributed much to progress in understanding. Among the things that have held the advancement of science back, however, are forces that hinder freedom of expression and a free choice of methods. Censorship is an obvious example (e.g., Ehninger & Brockriede, 1963). But even in the absence of explicit censorial control, it seems that belonging to a group adhering to specific beliefs can also stifle independent thinking (e.g., Haidt, 2013).

There is no doubt that Skinner was an exceptional man. Still, when Overskeid et al. (2012) tried to map his "personality," we concluded that "Skinner's personality profile was consistent with findings regarding those of other notable scientists" (p. 187). Could it be that Skinner not only shared key traits with other distinguished researchers, but also that the "personality" of his school of thought, radical behaviorism, bore certain similarities to that of other schools?

Why might this be the case? One answer has to do with the tendency of some groups to self-segregate (e.g., Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). From the world of legal scholarship, for example, Delgado and Stefancic report "Progressive legal scholars from different schools of thought often work in isolation, as though those of other persuasions hardly existed" (2020, p. 6).

Haidt, a social psychologist, points out "We evolved to live in groups. Our minds were designed not only to help us win the competition within our groups, but also to help us unite with those in our group to win competitions across groups" (2013 p. 283). Haidt also reminds us: "In moral and political matters we are often groupish, rather than selfish. We deploy our reasoning skills to support our team ..." (2013, p. 107). And Li points out that scholarly matters can become political—"By 'political' I refer to the aspect of the discourse where people promote and protect their perceived interests, either consciously or unconsciously, rather than being motivated by scholarly or theoretical considerations" (2015, p. 899).

The Life Cycle of Schools of Thought

Criticism can seem unfair and unwarranted. On the other hand, this special issue is published because behaviorists tend to see *About Behaviorism* as a central work, which therefore deserves a serious discussion.

So let us consider two critiques of Skinner’s behaviorism that come from authors who appear well-informed about the radical behaviorism Skinner (1974) describes, and who address questions that may be important.

Schnaitter observes, “In surveying the historical critical landscape, it is striking how steadfastly behaviorism has managed not to reform itself. One might speculate that a behaviorism without eighty years of criticism would be little different from the behaviorism of today” (1999, p. 210). If Schnaitter is right, the following words by Svartdal may be describing part of the reason for the situation being as Schnaitter portrays it:

Compared to research in other psychological sub-fields, behavior analysis does not seem to foster the creative, original research necessary for progress. One obvious reason for this is the strict ideological regime within radical behaviorism regarding the subject matter and its measurement (rate of response), design (N=1), data analysis (visual, qualitative inspection, no statistics), and so on. No other psychological sub-field provides comparable constraints on the researcher. (Svartdal, 2014, p. 100)

“[S]chools of thought fade away making room for new ideas ...,” says Komorowska (2023, p. 192). Buechner puts it more generally: “All ‘isms’ run out in the end, and good riddance to most of them ...” (1992, p. 175). They may run out in our domain, too. Schultz and Schultz (2008), who were quoted above, also state “The emergence of the various schools of thought and their subsequent decline and replacement by others is a striking characteristic of the history of psychology” (p. 22). Is radical behaviorism, then, simply going the way it must? Are we merely witnessing an inevitable destiny playing out?

The Legacy of Functionalism and the Future of Behaviorism

Or—if there is any truth to the depictions above—is there a way out of the predicament? One alternative might be to start by asking: What is success? In a scientific sense, Skinner’s criterion is clear; it is prediction and control of behavior. The two are “inherent in operant conditioning” (Skinner, 1974, p. 226), and “our interpretations will have the support of the prediction and control which have been possible under other conditions” (Skinner, 1974, p. 176). But what if we want behaviorist ideas to win—to conquer the “minds” and control the behavior of anyone wanting to understand behavior?

Let us look at the school of functionalism, which, though it no longer exists, may be the greatest success of all psychological schools of thought. How can that be the case?

Teigen gives us a clue by pointing out that “modern psychology remains strongly influenced by functionalist thinking” (2015, p. 173; translation by ChatGPT and G.O.). And Henley explains “Unlike structuralism, which faded away as a school because most of its findings and methodologies were rejected, functionalism lost its distinctiveness as a school because most of its major tenets were assimilated into all forms of psychology” (2024, p. 263). Furthermore, as early as 1960, Chaplin and Krawiec were able to say about functionalism

As a systematic point of view it was an overwhelming success, but largely because of this success it is no longer a distinct ‘school’ of psychology. It was, so to speak, absorbed into contemporary psychology. No happier fate could await any point of view (p. 48).

It is possible, as we saw, that all schools and -isms must one day die. It is also possible, then, that a day will come when there is no longer a school of thought committed to the tenets of *About Behaviorism*. One may feel uncomfortable imagining this. But if that’s the case, the best choice is probably to accept the possibility (e.g., Ellis, 2005).

Radical behaviorism, though based on the thinking of an exceptional individual, may at some point fade away, in other words. Yet, the best ideas of Skinner and other radical behaviorists can survive in mainstream psychology. To maximize the likelihood that ideas from radical behaviorism, like those from functionalism, continue to shape psychology, the key must be to communicate.

There is a marketplace of ideas (e.g., Wonnell, 1986), and there’s no guarantee that every hunch will succeed in a place whose hallmark is vigorous debate. Furthermore, having a good idea is seldom enough.

It needs to be marketed (e.g., Woolgar, 2004), and internal debate among friends, such as other behaviorists, is unlikely to be sufficient. It may be necessary to do what Friman et al. advise in the title of their paper, “Instead of preaching to the choir, publish outside of the box” (2013).

After all, scientific thinking, paired with open debate, has proven its power to predict and control: Medications save more lives than ever, we have artificial intelligence, and soda with hundreds of flavors. Shouldn't this give hope that behaviorists' best ideas can also prevail? Indeed, if all who want to understand behavior take part in an open-minded debate, Siebert's prediction may well turn out to be right: “The true and sound will survive; the false and unsound will be vanquished” (1963, p. 45).

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Author Note

Related reports: I have also argued previously that behavior analysis should consider moving towards closer integration with mainstream psychology.

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