Some Criticisms of Behaviorism

Although rooted in the nineteenth century and before, it was not until 1913, with Watson’s publication of his famous paper, “Psychology as the behaviorist views it,” that behaviorism gained a name and recognizable public identity. Since this inception behaviorism has been subjected to a more or less continuous stream of criticism. During the roughly two decade period of the late 1950s through the late 1970s this criticism assumed the proportions of a full-blown assault when in its header moments an almost Manichean construction of theoretical debate arose. The more energetic rhetoric of this period seemed less thoughtful than moral, with the purpose of bringing about the destruction of the behaviorist evil and the hegemony of the cognitive good. Following this period of high fervor the critique of behaviorism has over the past two decades subsided significantly, the critics for a variety of reasons having come to the opinion that the battle had been won. The dominant view — that is, the view among the cognitive cognoscenti — now appears to be that behaviorism has been sufficiently marginalized to pose no continuing threat. Consequently what one does tend to find in the current literature is the odd historical reference, to Chomsky or whomever, rather than anything much new. The period of vigorous criticism has substantially passed.

Although today’s critical material lacks interest because of its tired repetition, in some instances an entirely new phenomenon catches the eye. A striking example can be found in Howard Gardner’s recent piece in The New York Review of Books. In this 1995 essay Gardner spent the entire first section – five substantial paragraphs in all – rehashing for yet one more time Chomsky’s review of Skinner’s Verbal Behavior from thirty-six years before:

... Skinner was the most respected experimental psychologist in the world and the leader of the influential behaviorist movement ... Chomsky ... had just turned thirty and was already teaching linguistics at MIT ... In thirty tightly reasoned and scathing pages, he subjected nearly every facet of Skinner’s book to criticism and much of it to ridicule ... [the review] was to topple behaviorism and itself become a new orthodoxy” (Gardner, 1995, p. 32).

What is so striking about Gardner’s piece is not simply that it takes Chomsky’s work of 1959 to be the definitive criticism of the behaviorist position, but that Gardner so facilely elevates historical events to the status of myth, where matters of fact, detail, and accuracy no longer count. What have become important to Gardner are the confrontation’s mythic dimensions: that
the boy Chomsky picked up a stone and with a mighty blow slew the giant Skinner, who tumbled to the ground and never rose again.

One imagines that these mythic tellings serve important ritual functions in socializing new members to the cognitive tribe. But anyone with a serious interest in the conceptual problems and philosophical controversies surrounding behaviorism would be better served by returning to Skinner’s book to find out just what was originally said, to Chomsky’s review to determine what Chomsky thought he had read, and to MacCorquodal (1970), Richelle (1976), Andresen (1990), and others for commentary on the degree to which Chomsky was actually mounting criticisms of Skinner or was simply using Skinner’s book as a springboard from which to launch a diatribe against “a mixture of odds and ends of other behaviorisms and some other fancies of vague origin” (MacCorquodale, 1970, p. 83). Such pursuits continue to reward those who take the time to carefully explore the original terrain rather than relying on current myth and oral tradition.

The critique of behaviorism, then, passed through a “golden age” and it is that period to which I return in these remarks. Concerning this period, were one simply to catalog the criticisms of behaviorism the list no doubt would be of great length. In its entirety what the list would consist of I really do not know. MacCorquodale, considering just the criticisms from Chomsky’s review of Verbal Behavior, boiled the arguments down to three. Skinner, who framed his 1974 book About Behaviorism as a response to criticism, listed twenty. Neither of these lists is entirely satisfactory, although MacCorquodale’s abstract from Chomsky is more useful than Skinner’s which is of uncertain provenance. In what follows I make no pretense to a comprehensive catalog of this critical history. The project is a more limited consideration of three central themes from the peak era of behaviorist criticism.

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. Indeed, certain potential difficulties have been virtually ignored by the behaviorist community. Later I will go on at length about the problem of intentionality. In a nutshell, the intentional argument says it is impossible to explain any interesting bit of behavior without use of a content-bearing idiom, and inasmuch as behaviorism eschews the content-bearing modalities, behaviorism thus fails. E.g., to account adequately for the behavior of a squirrel gnawing at a nut it is necessary to make use of a construction of the general form that the squirrel is gnawing at the nut because it believes there to be a nutmeat within the shell. “Believes” is the intentional attitude, and the “that clause” is its content, to wit, “there is a nutmeat inside.” This