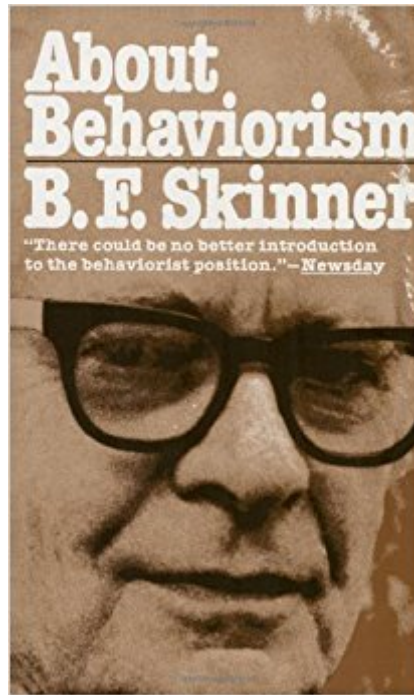


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About Behaviorism



Synopsis

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

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Written late in Skinner's life, this broadly-scoped statement of Skinner's philosophy is not only an outstanding, clear, and relatively nontechnical primer to Skinner's philosophy, but it is also one of the few places where Skinner undertook to defend his positions against critics, on exactly the same points that are still widely assumed to neatly dismiss not only Skinner, but all of his ideas - and sometimes the entire notion of behavioral science - in one specious swoop. In mid-century, Skinner became strongly associated with the word 'behaviorism' (so much so that it is now common to see famous, well-published academics confusing him with Watson, the originator of the word 'behaviorism,' whose views and approach were fundamentally different.) Skinner's views are actually called "radical behaviorism" to distinguish them from others like Watsonian S-R behaviorism, Hull's neo-behaviorism, Tolman's purposive behaviorism, and so on. Radical behaviorism, as many prior behaviorisms, held that behavior was caused in ordinary natural ways, and hence that it could be studied just as scientifically as, say, biology was, with just as little unnecessary mystery. What made it 'radical,' however, was not really that it was more behaviorist than other behaviorism, but that it embraced the existence of only-privately-observed events, like one's thoughts and feelings, in such a way that they were also considered behavior. (cf. Skinner's

quote, 'The skin is not so important as a boundary.

"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.

A letter to the editor (published in August 1990 in the Los Angeles Times, in response to Skinner's obituary) asked the following disturbing question: For the all effort and money spent in research in psychology, has there been any progress whatsoever? The letter-writer asked this question not only of the Skinnerian approach in psychology but of all approaches. He seemed to be rather knowledgeable in psychology. (If I remember right, he granted that the effects of intermittent reinforcement may well be something non-obvious that the research has uncovered. His point was that there is not much more.) I was disturbed by this allegation. However, I couldn't come up with a smoking gun rebuttal (though my thoughts were along the lines of verbal behavior and programmed instruction.) Rereading About Behaviorism last week, I feel that Chapter 2 of this book may be pointed to as an unassailable answer to the above question -- Skinner makes some points here that are true advances being made for the first time in the history of human thought. These are Skinner's

views on what self-knowledge and introspection is, the special problems posed by them, and how we have "solved" them at least partially. Skinner's views on these may well undergo considerable revision in the future -- however, without his first statement, such an improvement would not have been possible. According to Skinner, the responses involved in introspection and self-knowledge are nothing more than verbal reports to stimulations inside the body. (In other words, these are not some mysterious non-physical stuff. The mind-body problem is solved neatly.

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