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In Response

Further Comments on Praxics: Why the Devotion to Behaviorism?

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The commentaries on praxics that appeared recently in this journal (Leigland, 1985; Malagodi & Branch, 1985) made me remember something. In recent papers (Epstein, 1984a, 1985, in press-a, in press-b, in press-c), I have argued, as others have before me, that we should establish a new science of behavior under a new Greek name. The science, I have claimed, must and indeed will break free of the ism that helped to inspire it. It must also separate from psychology, which is the study of mind, and align itself more closely with kindred natural sciences.

The Praxics Society, which is devoted to the achievement of these ends, is growing rapidly; it is an exciting and vital organization that is drawing the interest of scientists in several disciplines. A *Praxics* magazine may soon come to life, and with it a prestigious and comprehensive science of behavior may finally blossom.[1]

But Branch, Leigland, and Malagodi were not entirely persuaded, especially by the distinction I have drawn between praxics and behaviorism. Behaviorism, or at least radical behaviorism, they said, is *vital* to the study of behavior.

Why the devotion to the ism? (Isms, of course, inspire devotion, and that is part of the problem.)

Movements

At first glance, behaviorism, whatever the flavor, would appear to be nothing more than an old and rather dessicated movement for reform in psychology. Certainly, that is the way most outsiders view it. For many years it was little more than a whipping boy; now many prominent psychologists just ignore it. The mission of behaviorism was to replace psychology's traditional and etymological subject matter with a new one. Etymology prevailed.

But the behaviorism to which Branch et al. referred is clearly something more than a desiccated movement. *The movement failed and, in failing, it became something else.*

Here is what I remembered: Reform movements seldom succeed, and they also seldom fail. They seldom succeed because it is difficult to transform any established enterprise, religious or scientific, from within. What looks like transformation often isn't. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Reform movements also seldom fail because, if there is any merit to the mission of reform, the mission comes to take on its own life; it evolves and often assumes a new identity. Martin Luther was distraught at the lack of piety he saw in Rome in 1510, but he did not set about to establish a new Church. Rather, he tried to reform Catholicism from within. He worked his way up the Church hierarchy, protesting with increasing vehemence various practices that he viewed as corrupt. In response to strong criticism, he elaborated his views and extended them to other areas. Finally, in 1521, af-

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ter he challenged papal authority, he was excommunicated. With this new credential, Luther continued to elaborate and expound his views, and, to make a long story short, there are now more than 70 million Lutherans worldwide.

So much for the reform of Catholicism.

Elaboration

Early behaviorists also tried to reform something that did not want reforming. Psychology did not immediately yield its offices, laboratories, journal pages, professorships, students, organizations, and honors to the intruders. The behaviorists had to fight for every inch of territory they gained, the gains were often small, and strongholds, such as they were, were often lost (consider the rise and fall of the experimental analysis of behavior at Columbia University or Arizona State University, or the death of the Learning Center at Northeastern University, or, more recently, the demise of the Behavior Therapy Unit at Temple University).

When a mission is failing, its leaders *elaborate.* Apparently, Watson hadn't explained the mission clearly enough, so Watson himself and then Skinner and others defended it, corrected it, expanded it, and repeated it. Repetition, after all, is the mother of wisdom. From some rather naive and unsophisticated assertions, a full-blown philosophy of science (Skinner, 1974; Zuriff, 1985) emerged: Behavior is a legitimate and important subject matter *because* . . . . Feelings are unimportant *because* . . . . The study of mind is forbidden *because* . . . . Cognitive psychology is an unimportant enterprise *because* . . . . Cognitive science is objectionable *because* . . . .

In short, contemporary behaviorism is the rationale, greatly elaborated from the original, for why praxists deserve office space in psychology departments. Had we been given the resources we wanted in the first place—had psychology yielded its subject matter and resources—we would never have bothered to elaborate the rationale. We would have advanced the science and left its philosophical elaboration to the philosophers of science. Students of behavior have been devoted to the ism because it has long served as their theodicy, their *raison d'être,* and their hope for the future.

Behaviorism is not a scientific theory, not by a long shot, contrary to the assertion of Malagodi and Branch (1985). Relativity theory, the theory of plate tectonics, quantum theory, unified field theory, and, to a lesser extent, evolutionary theory, are all predictive, formal, and testable. They were inspired by a wealth of data and are constrained by data in their every aspect. Behaviorism, however, is a *philosophy of science,* as Skinner (1974) states so clearly. Behavioristic assertions guide research only as philosophical assertions guide research—by directing interest toward one variable or another or one topic or another. Behavioristic assertions are not data based and are not *tested* by research.

Scope

Two minor points regarding the scope of praxics were misunderstood in both commentaries:

First, although it seems obvious to me that praxics laboratories must and will be opened to nonbehaviorists, I do not believe that theories of behavior should (or ever will) become mentalistic. I say this not on doctrinal grounds but simply because mentalistic theories are not very powerful, useful, or effective theories of behavior (cf. Epstein, 1984b, 1984c, in press-a; Epstein & Koerner, in press). You can believe in mind, feelings, or, for that matter, the Holy Ghost, and still do a damned good job of discovering how behavior varies as a function of genes, nutrition, sleep deprivation, operant and classical conditioning, instructions, modeling, physiology, anatomy, neural and chemical interventions, and so on. Most physicists believe in mind, but they have refrained from attributing the actions of subatomic particles to mental forces—*because more effective accounts are possible.*

Malagodi and Branch fail to understand that psychology is concerned with mentalistic theories *not because of any*

concern with behavior but because of a concern with mind qua mind. We must face the fact that there are people out there who have a genuine scientific interest in *mind* and who observe behavior only to get insights into *mind.* And we must face the fact that the time has come for us to leave them alone. We have work of our own to do.

Finally, "praxics" is not a new name for the experimental analysis of behavior. It is a name for *the study of behavior.* No methodology or *weltanschauung* is implied.

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