

Part XV: Afterword: Some Concluding Remarks

27. In the Yellow Wood

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As one might have expected, there is little consensus and a great deal of controversy in this volume. Perhaps it needs a new title. On only one matter — which, unfortunately, is given little treatment — is there universal agreement and, indeed, praise: Skinner has made significant contributions to the scientific understanding of behavior. His first book, *The Behavior of Organisms* (1938), is singled out repeatedly as a *tour de force*. Skinner as researcher and methodologist is untouchable; consider the matter closed.

Other matters, mainly 'meta' or 'ismic' in nature, rouse the critics to ire. Skinner has given us 'dogmas'. His positions on various issues are 'superficial', 'scanty', 'confused', 'paltry', 'uninspired', 'restrictive', 'inherently incomplete', 'constraining', and 'naive'. Praise and damnation. Quick consensus and prolonged, perhaps unending, controversy. Why?

The history of psychology sheds some light. 'Psychology' is derived from the Greek 'psyche', which originally meant 'breath' and came to mean 'soul' or 'mind'. A concern with the nature of mind can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle's *Peri Psyches*; advances in a variety of scientific disciplines in the nineteenth century led, finally, to the application of scientific methods to the study of mind. By the end of the century a new science had taken shape, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the science of the nature, functions, and phenomena of the human soul or mind'. 'From the most ancient subject', said Ebbinghaus, 'we shall produce the newest science.'

But in 1905 something peculiar happened. William McDougall, in his *Primer of Physiological Psychology*, defined psychology as 'the study of behavior'. He had no particular complaints against the old subject matter, but he thought that behavior, too, deserved attention (Watson and McDougall, 1928). In 1913 Watson went a step further. Psychology should study behavior, he said, and mind, the traditional subject matter, is now *forbidden*. The assertion was absurd; proclaiming someone else's field yours does not make it so. But Watson was charismatic,

and he promised many applications. Moreover, the possibility of a science of behavior was in the air; Charles Mercier, J.S. Mill, and others had suggested that it be established as an independent field. Had their suggestions been followed, the science of behavior would now very likely be one of the most effective and respected disciplines in the world. But Watson set the new science on a steep and thorny way — as the belligerent footman of psychology.

The movement for reform had, appropriately, an ism in its name: *behaviorism*. And the ism carried with it many untested and untestable assertions, philosophical in character: unobservables are off limits; behavior is determined; thought is laryngeal movement; nurture conquers nature. All extra baggage, really, since the mission of the crusade was simply to make behavior the subject matter of a science. The movement was destined to fail. Even during the three decades when behaviorism was conspicuous in psychology, the traditional subject matter held its own. With the advent of computers and the alliances that were formed among psychologists, computer scientists, and linguists, the study of mind eventually flourished as it never had before. Today, less than 2 per cent of the membership of the American Psychological Association identifies itself openly with the behavioristic tradition.

The movement died, but its legacy is clear: it created a fanatical concern for objectivity in psychology proper. It led to the development of a school of philosophy, which today is the proper referent of the word 'behaviorism'. And, perhaps most important, it convinced many people that the behavior of organisms is a legitimate subject matter in its own right. The study of behavior, which some now call 'praxis' (from the Greek '*praxis*', for 'behavior'), may yet become an independent and important science (Epstein, 1984, 1985).

Skinner is both praised and damned because he is both praxist and behaviorist and — even though he recognizes the difference (Skinner, 1974) — because the lines of separation are not always clear. As praxist, Skinner single-handedly advanced the science as no one has done before or since. As behaviorist, Skinner greatly elaborated and refined Watson's naive philosophical views. But the overlap has caused trouble. Almost all the complaints against Skinner in this volume and elsewhere have to do with the mixing of the science and the philosophy. The 'conceptual imperatives' Skinner is said to have imposed on the science are, with few exceptions, the imperatives of the ism. Skinner's 'interpretations' are extrapolations from the science, constrained by, or at least consistent with, the ism.

Philosophy has no limits, but no science should be constrained by a philosophy. It is the subject matter of behavior that is important, not any particular methodology or set of variables. No one should be denied a place in the behavioral laboratory because he or she is not a behaviorist. Moreover, the science of behavior cannot flourish in psychology's shadow. The squabbling has only been destructive to both disciplines — especially to the intruder.

The future is clear. The science of behavior will go free of the ism that helped bring it to life, just as other natural sciences have broken free of their own philosophical forebears (consider Hopkins, 1934). With the ism left behind, Mercier's proposal may finally be realized: the new science may finally emerge as an independent field.

Skinner's contributions will be similarly partitioned, also with good effect. He will be recognized in various disciplines in different ways, just as Descartes is revered in mathematics for different reasons than he is remembered in philoso-

phy. The landscape is not yet right. We cannot yet get a dispassionate view. But we are in the yellow wood. For the good of the science — and, indeed, if Skinner is right, for the good of humanity — behaviorism and the science of behavior must go their separate ways.

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