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STRAW PARADOXES

A Commentary on Bernard J. Baars' 'Double Life of B.F. Skinner'

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Having known and worked with B.F. Skinner for the last 15 years of his life, having collected and read everything he ever published as well as a great deal of material he never published, and having edited a quarter century of his private notes into book form (Epstein, 1980), I simply do not recognize the man that Baars has constructed. Lacking concrete evidence that Skinner lived some sort of 'conflicted' or 'double' life, Baars has engaged in wishful thinking of the most extreme sort. He has constructed a stick-figure Skinner, composed largely of limbs borrowed from the corpse of John B. Watson, supplemented by fragile twigs of his own design, and held together by glue every bit as ephemeral as the 'consciousness' he so worships.

Let's cut to the chase. B.F. Skinner was probably the least conflicted person I've ever known — in addition, by the way, to being the happiest, most creative, and most productive. Baars' assertions that Skinner was 'deeply at odds with himself', that he was suffering from significant 'inner conflicts', that he was not 'at peace with himself', that he was involved in never-ending 'struggles', and that he lived an 'elaborate pretence', are patently absurd. Skinner believed in his behaviouristic credo, and he also made it work for himself in every aspect of his life. Consistent with his belief that behaviour was determined by environmental histories, Skinner deliberately and systematically manipulated his own environment to boost his creativity, maximize his productivity, and even improve his mood (Epstein, 1997). There was no trace of conflict in this process. Quite the contrary, it worked like a charm until his dying day (Vargas, 1990). I spent many

intimate moments with Fred Skinner over the years — at restaurants, movie theatres, his home and mine, by his pool, in the laboratory we created together, and so on. If there were even a trace of pretence in Skinner's public persona, I would have seen it. But Skinner was the real deal. Unlike Freud, who was unable to use his own system to spare himself the pain of his own neuroses (Breger, 2000), Skinner benefitted daily from the system of behaviour-analytic techniques he helped to create.

So how did Baars make such a huge mistake? First, he made much of a brief account Skinner gave of a year he spent after college trying to become a creative writer — a year Skinner himself labelled 'Dark'. Baars argued that because Skinner failed to write much that year, he rejected the 'subjective' life in favour of the coldly scientific. That's an overly dramatic and simplistic assessment of what happened. In fact, having spent much of his time building model ships rather than writing, Skinner simply realized, as many hopeful writers do, that he didn't have what it takes to become a professional writer. But more important for our present purposes is Baars' assertion that Skinner somehow abandoned, or at least tried to abandon, his 'subjective' side, which, as Baars uses the term, would seem to encompass all of Skinner's literary and creative interests, as well. In fact, Skinner never abandoned any of the richness of his own experience. He loved romance, fiction, TV sports, bawdy limericks, magic, and Stendahl; he also freely engaged in thinking — and even in thinking about thinking — for how could he not? Skinner also loved science. Baars would have us believe that there is some 'conflict' or 'paradox' here, but there simply isn't any. One needs precision, and, yes, even special language, in the behavioural laboratory, but just because someone enters the lab on occasion doesn't mean that he or she needs to give up one jot of his or her subjective life — if, indeed, there is some way to do so! Although he only published one novel, Skinner continued to dabble in creative writing, to read great literature and participate in literature and acting groups, to play the piano and organ, and to express his creativity through invention and composition throughout his life (Epstein, 1991). Even hardcore physicists — Einstein comes to mind — lead rich, imaginative, subjective lives without apparent conflict. Why should Skinner have had a problem? Skinner rejected certain kinds of subjectivity in the construction of psychological theories, but that never led him, or me, or any other behavioural scientist I've ever known, down a path toward personal conflict.

Baars also confuses Skinner's views with Watson's. While it's true that Skinner was inspired to enter psychology by one of Watson's books, Skinner was more leader than disciple, and one of the main ways in which his views diverged from Watson's was in his serious consideration of private experience — what Baars calls 'consciousness'. Beginning with his 1945 essay, 'The Operational Analysis of Psychological Terms,' Skinner (1945a) wrote extensively about private events for nearly half a century. Baars reluctantly admits that Skinner acknowledged the existence of such experience, but he then rejects this important observation in a curious way, arguing that 'only the most careful readers of Skinner's work' were aware of the distinction Skinner drew between private

experience and 'subjectivity'. I'd argue, quite the contrary, that only the most careless readers of Skinner work could fail to recognize Skinner's deep fascination with the very phenomenon that Baars claimed he ignored. Baars seems to hold Skinner responsible for the fact that some of Skinner's critics — including Baars himself — don't seem to read Skinner's writings very carefully, but that hardly seems fair.

Baars has misinterpreted or misrepresented Skinner in many ways, large and small, but I'll mention just two more examples. First, Baars suggests that the debate between Frazier and Burriss in Skinner's novel, *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948) again exemplifies Skinner's various 'struggles'. But the serious debate about freedom and cognition in the novel was between Frazier and a third character, Castle, and no one has ever suggested that Castle's perspective matched Skinner's in any way. Moreover, the debate between Frazier and Burriss (who in some sense represented two 'sides' of Skinner) was fully resolved at the end of the novel, with Frazier, the more radical of the two, winning handily. It's notable that *Walden Two* was completed in 1945, the same year that Skinner published 'The Operational Analysis of Psychological Terms'. If Skinner ever had any doubts about his brand of behaviourism — and I know of no evidence that he did — it could be argued that they were fully resolved by 1945.

Second, Baars suggests that the 'aircrib', the enclosed crib Skinner designed for his second child (Skinner, 1945b), was a tool he used to condition his daughter and that she was 'not taken out to be hugged and to play freely'. Skinner's programme of conditioning children, says Baars, 'followed a path famously pioneered by Watson'. This is so far off I barely know what to make of it. Skinner wasn't just a scientist, he was also a tinkerer and inventor, and the aircrib was simply a better crib. Parents who used aircribs — including the Skinners — hugged and played with their children every bit as much as parents who used conventional cribs (Epstein & Bailey, 1995). The crib was never used for conditioning purposes, and, unlike Watson, Skinner never recommended withholding love from children.

So what *was* Skinner's perspective on consciousness? First, as I've already noted, the experience that gives rise to the language of consciousness is quite real; Skinner never claimed otherwise. It can hardly be denied that we think, imagine, feel, and so on. Second, as Baars, a neuroscientist, would no doubt agree, this experience is a physical phenomenon; it's *activity*, mainly of the nervous system; there's no need to invoke the existence of a mental world to understand and explain conscious experience. Third, like many of his contemporaries in various schools of psychology, Skinner believed that introspection was an unreliable method for learning about human functioning. Fourth, Skinner believed that it was senseless to speak of thoughts, images, and so on, as *things*. As modern neuroimaging studies are indeed confirming, when we 'imagine', we are engaging in neural activity similar to that of seeing; we are seeing in the absence of the thing seen. An image is not an object; it's activity, or, as Skinner preferred to say, it's *behaviour*. And finally, Skinner felt strongly that we err when we assert that cognitive or neural activities are the *causes* of overt

behaviour. Activity inside our skin is part of what we need to explain, not explanatory in its own right. The causes of behaviour — all behaviour: neural, cognitive, and overt — lie, according to Skinner, in the phylo- and ontogenic histories of the organism. Looking at a phenomenon at different levels of organization can produce valuable insights, but it doesn't, said Skinner, identify causes; causation moves in only one direction, and true causes lie in the past.

Baars seems exasperated over the fact that Skinner may have been the best-known scientist of the twentieth century. He accounts for this by asserting, rather ungenerously, that Skinner was a manipulative showman, but a more realistic explanation for Skinner's fame was that his work touched so many lives. There's hardly a clinic or business or classroom in the world that hasn't benefited from operant technology.

I agree with Baars on one point: Skinner's nonscientific writings carry considerable philosophical baggage, and the baggage is more harmful than helpful at this point. The unusual circumstances that gave rise to the old turf battles between behaviourists and cognitivists no longer exist (Epstein, 1996). The time has come to put aside the isms and the polemics and to cooperate in advancing the behavioural, cognitive, and neural sciences in all their aspects.

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