

B.F. Skinner:
excerpt from *A Historical
Introduction to the Philosophy of
Mind*

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Burrhus Frederic SKinner



- 1904-1990
- One of the most influential American psychologist, philosopher
- Died of Leukemia in Cambridge, MA
- Alma mater: **Hamilton College**, Harvard University
- Best known for behavior analysis, operant conditioning, radical behaviorism, verbal behaviorism

Background

“The inner man wills an actions, the outer executes it”.
(Skinner 161 a)

Appeal to “psychic inner causes”

1. a dualistic view that connects the inner states and body
2. Behaviors are passive, which are monitored by mind

I. Inner States are Useless

- D1 “We cannot find instances specifically for one behavior” (Skinner 161a).
- D2 “We cannot alter the nervous system to set behavioral antecedent” (Skinner 161a).
- D3 Introspection does not provide information of causes (Skinner 161b)
- D4 External environment must be related
- DC Inner states is “of limited usefulness in the prediction and control of specific behavior” (161a)

D1 Unobservability

D1 no specific instances
D2 cannot alter nervous system
D3 introspection doesn't provide causes
D4 environment must be considered
DC inner states are useless

- Too complicated to achieve causes by observing “gross anatomy”
- Unconsciousness is illegit (Marcus)
attack Freud's idea on unconsciousness: we cannot observe unconsciousness through senses

“Any mental event which is unconscious is inferential, and the explanation is not based upon independent observation of a valid cause” (Skinner 161).

e.g. mathematicians knows how he thinks but cannot explain his mental process leading to the solution

D2 alteration in nervous system

D1 no specific instances
D2 cannot alter nervous system
D3 introspection doesn't provide causes
D4 environment must be considered
DC inner states are useless

- We cannot alter our nervous system. Even if we can, we still cannot sense any alteration in our nervous system through feelings or vision.

D3 Empty term (Marcus)

D1 no specific instances
D2 cannot alter nervous system
D3 introspection doesn't provide causes
D4 environment must be considered
DC inner states are useless

“ When a professor turns up in the wrong classroom or gives the wrong lecture, it is because his mind is absent. If he forgets to give a reading assignment, it is because it has slipped his mind. He begins to tell an old joke but pause for a moment, and it is evident to everyone that he is making up his mind” (Skinner 162a).

- Absent-minded = going to the wrong classroom → redundancy (Marcus)
- Fake causal relationship: being absent-minded does not explain why a professor goes to the wrong classroom

D4 Environment Matters

D1 no specific instances
D2 cannot alter nervous system
D3 introspection doesn't provide causes
D4 environment must be considered
DC inner states are useless

- Neural condition with precision → the antecedent of a behavior
- Following “immediate responses”, the series of events will lead us to events outside the organism, that is, external events (Skinner 161a).

Dangers of Appealing to Inner States

- Natural inclination: attributing properties to things “without fear of contradiction” (Skinner 160a)
- Illogical: circular argument and begging the question. E.g. “shell shock” = “neuropsychiatric”, assuming that shell shock is due to neural disorder, while we don’t have any evidence to support this
- Easily build the causal relationship between feelings and behaviors – “conceptual inner causes”

“A single set of facts is described by the two statements: ‘He eats’ and ‘He is hungry.’ is dangerous, because it suggests that we have found the cause and therefore need search no further. Moreover, such term as ‘hunger’ converts what are essentially the properties of a process into things” (Skinner 162b).

Variables in Behavior's Function

- Multi-factors
- E.g. a man being brought into a room in which there is a glass of water
- Factors that may increase or decrease the possibility of him drinking the water: excretion of water (sweating, exercise), excretion of urine, and loss of blood. Also, he will not drink if he drank a lot of water before entering the room
- Therefore, we can manipulate him by controlling the variables

Social Factors

Other variables

- things added to the water
- Suspect poisoned water
- culture (drink when no one is watching)

“We must know the history of our subject with respect to the behavior of drinking water, and if we cannot eliminate social factors from the situation, then we must know the history of his personal relations to people resembling the experiments” (Skinner 163b).

These are all factors outside of the organism

Conclusion

- Skinner undermines notion of inner states in determining the antecedent of behaviors.
- He views that behaviors as responses to a collection of stimulus situations observable outside of organisms and that behaviors depend on a person's past (Walsh).

Source

- Walsh, Anthony. "B. F. Skinner & Behaviorism's Take on Personality." *Northampton.edu*. N.p., 25 Apr. 2001. Web. 5 Apr. 2011.
<<http://www.northampton.edu/Documents/Faculty/Harold%20Weiss/Intro%20to%20Philosophy/skinner.pdf>>.