

The Behaviourist Analysis On Human Mind: A Philosophical Dissection

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Abstract: Behaviourism occupies a distinctive place in the history of the philosophy of mind, for it sought to resolve the perennial mind-body problem not by explaining mental phenomena but by explaining them away, reducing thought, sensation, and emotion to observable patterns of stimulus and response. The background to this study lies in the mid-twentieth century ascendancy of behaviourism as the dominant scientific and philosophical account of mental life, an ascendancy that promised objectivity but arguably purchased that objectivity at the cost of the very phenomena the philosophy of mind exists to explain. The problem addressed is that behaviourism, in both its psychological and logical variants, faces persistent philosophical difficulties in accounting for the first-person, qualitative, and intentional character of mental states, difficulties its proponents have never fully resolved. The thesis defended is that behaviourism, while methodologically valuable as a corrective against uncritical introspectionism and Cartesian dualism, is philosophically inadequate as a complete theory of mind, since it cannot accommodate the subjective dimension of consciousness without covertly reintroducing the mentalistic categories it set out to eliminate. The study adopts the method of critical philosophical analysis, combining conceptual clarification, comparative exposition, and argumentative evaluation of primary and secondary sources drawn from both Western and African philosophical traditions. The finding is that behaviourism, though historically instrumental in disciplining psychological inquiry, ultimately proves inadequate when confronted with counterexamples drawn from linguistic creativity, private experience, and qualia. The study concludes that an adequate philosophy of mind must retain behaviourism's empirical discipline while restoring the ineliminable reality of inner mental life.

Keywords: Behaviourism, Philosophy of Mind, Mind-Body Problem, Logical Behaviourism, Consciousness, Category Mistake

INTRODUCTION

The question of what the mind is, and how mental phenomena relate to physical processes, ranks among the oldest and most persistent problems in philosophy. Of the many theories proposed to resolve this problem, behaviourism stands out for the boldness of its proposed solution: rather than explain the relationship between mind and body, it proposes to dissolve the problem by denying that mental states, understood as inner, private occurrences, exist as a distinct explanatory category at all. On the behaviourist

account, to say that a person is in pain, believes a proposition, or desires an outcome is, at bottom, to say something about that person's actual or dispositional behaviour, not about some hidden inner episode accessible only to the person having it.

This paper undertakes a philosophical dissection of behaviourism, examining its historical development, its central theoretical commitments, and the criticisms that have been advanced against it. The problem that motivates this dissection is that behaviourism, despite its considerable influence on twentieth-century psychology and philosophy, has never satisfactorily answered a cluster of objections concerning the subjective, qualitative, and creative aspects of mental life. These objections raise a question of continuing philosophical importance: whether an adequate account of the human mind can be given entirely in terms of publicly observable behaviour, or whether such an account inevitably omits something essential to mentality itself.

The thesis of this paper is that behaviourism, whether in its psychological form, associated with Watson and Skinner, or its logical form, associated with Ryle, provides a methodologically disciplined but philosophically incomplete account of mind. It is methodologically valuable because it guards against the excesses of introspectionism and Cartesian dualism, both of which treat the mind as a private theatre inaccessible to scientific scrutiny. It is philosophically incomplete because it cannot, without contradiction, account for the first-person character of conscious experience, the creative and rule-governed nature of human language, and the possibility of mental states that produce no behavioural manifestation whatsoever.

The paper proceeds in six sections. The first clarifies the central concepts of mind, behaviour, and behaviourism. The second traces the historical development of behaviourism from its psychological origins to its logical refinement. The third examines logical behaviourism in closer detail, with particular attention to Ryle's category mistake argument. The fourth presents the major philosophical objections to behaviourism. The fifth situates behaviourism within a comparative and contemporary philosophical perspective, drawing on both Western and African sources. The sixth offers a balanced philosophical assessment of behaviourism's contribution and limitations, after which the paper concludes. The method adopted throughout is critical philosophical analysis, involving conceptual clarification, textual exposition, and argumentative evaluation.

Conceptual Clarification: Mind, Behaviour, and Behaviourism

A preliminary clarification of terms is necessary before any philosophical assessment of behaviourism can proceed. Three concepts require definition: mind, behaviour, and behaviourism itself. The term mind, in ordinary philosophical usage, refers to that aspect of a person by virtue of which the person thinks, perceives, feels, believes, desires, and is aware of their own existence and surroundings. Historically, the dominant conception of mind in Western philosophy has been the Cartesian one, according to which the mind is a non-physical substance distinct from, though somehow interacting with, the physical body. It is precisely this Cartesian conception that behaviourism was formulated to oppose.

Behaviour, by contrast, refers to the observable, measurable responses of an organism to stimuli in its environment, responses that can, in principle, be recorded, quantified, and studied by methods analogous to those of the natural sciences. Watson, in his foundational manifesto for psychological behaviourism, insisted that psychology, if it is to become a genuinely objective science, must restrict itself entirely to the prediction and control of behaviour, treating consciousness as neither a definable nor a usable concept.¹

Behaviourism, then, is the theory, in both its psychological and philosophical forms, that mental states either are identical with, or are to be analysed exhaustively in terms of, behaviour and behavioural dispositions. Two principal variants of this theory require distinction. Psychological behaviourism, associated with Watson and later Skinner, is primarily a methodological and empirical thesis about how psychology ought to be conducted, namely, through the observation of stimulus-response regularities rather than through introspective reports of inner experience. Logical, or philosophical, behaviourism, associated principally with Ryle, is a stronger, semantic thesis, holding that statements about mental states are, upon correct logical analysis, translatable without residue into statements about actual and hypothetical behaviour. Ryle's own formulation of the theory arose from his rejection of what he termed the official Cartesian doctrine of the mind as a ghost inhabiting the machine of the body, a doctrine he considered to rest on a fundamental logical confusion regarding the categories to which mental and physical predicates properly belong.³

These two variants share a common motivation, namely, the conviction that mentalistic vocabulary, if it is to be scientifically or philosophically respectable, must ultimately be cashed out in terms that make no essential reference to private, unobservable inner episodes. It is this shared commitment, and its philosophical consequences, that occupy the remainder of this paper.

Historical Development of Behaviourism: From Watson to Skinner

Behaviourism emerged in the early twentieth century as a reaction against the introspectionist psychology dominant in the preceding decades, a psychology that relied heavily on trained subjects reporting the contents of their own conscious experience under controlled laboratory conditions. Watson, writing in 1913, rejected this method as unscientific, arguing that introspection produced data that could neither be independently verified nor reliably replicated across different observers.¹

This early, or classical, behaviourism was subsequently developed and systematised by Skinner, whose doctrine of radical behaviourism extended the behaviourist programme to cover not merely simple reflexes but complex operant behaviour, shaped and maintained by patterns of reinforcement and punishment. Skinner maintained that apparently intelligent, purposive human conduct, including verbal behaviour, could be explained without residue in terms of an organism's reinforcement history, without appeal to any inner mental cause standing between stimulus and response.² On this view, what common sense calls a person's thoughts, intentions, or beliefs are, at most, convenient shorthand for complex dispositions to behave in certain ways under certain conditions, dispositions themselves fully explicable by prior conditioning.

The philosophers Mendie and Udofia, reviewing this historical trajectory in the course of their own critique of Cartesian dualism, observe that behaviourism's appeal lay precisely in its promise to dissolve the seemingly intractable problem of how a non-physical mind could causally interact with a physical body, a problem that had troubled philosophy since Descartes first articulated his substance dualism.⁴ If mental states simply are behavioural dispositions, rather than inner episodes of a different ontological category from behaviour, then no causal bridge between two disparate substances need be built at all; the problem, on this view, does not require solving, since it never genuinely arose.

The historical trajectory from Watson's early manifesto to Skinner's mature system thus reveals behaviourism as a philosophical programme embedded within, and partly driven by, a broader scientific ambition, namely, to place the study of mind on the same secure empirical footing already achieved by the physical sciences. Whether that ambition was ultimately realised, or whether it was purchased at an unacceptable philosophical price, is a question the subsequent sections of this paper examine in detail.

Logical Behaviourism and Ryle's Category Mistake

While psychological behaviourism developed primarily as an empirical research programme within psychology, logical behaviourism developed as a properly philosophical thesis concerning the meaning of mentalistic language. Its most influential exponent, Ryle, approached the mind-body problem not as a metaphysical puzzle requiring a metaphysical solution, but as a symptom of confused thinking about logical categories, a confusion he set out to diagnose and dissolve rather than solve.

Ryle's central charge against the Cartesian conception of mind was that it commits what he termed a category mistake, an error in which something belonging to one logical category is mistakenly represented as though it belonged to another. His well-known illustration involves a visitor touring a university who, having been shown the various colleges, libraries, laboratories, and playing fields, then asks where the university itself is located, as though the university were some further building distinct from, and additional to, those already shown. The visitor's error lies not in any factual mistake but in a conceptual one, in failing to recognise that the university simply is the organised totality of those colleges, libraries, and activities, and not a separate entity over and above them.³

Applied to the mind-body problem, Ryle's argument holds that Cartesian dualism commits an analogous error: it treats mind and body as two entities of the same logical type, standing in some causal relation to one another, when in fact mental predicates such as intelligent, believes, or remembers describe not hidden inner episodes but the manner in which a person's publicly observable conduct is organised, structured, and disposed to unfold under specifiable conditions. To say that a person believes it is raining is, on this analysis, to say something about how that person is disposed to act, to speak, and to plan, not to report the presence of an inner mental item called a belief, existing in some private Cartesian theatre.

Ryle's logical behaviourism thus offers a more sophisticated argument than Watson's or Skinner's psychological behaviourism, since it operates at the level of conceptual analysis rather than empirical methodology. It does not merely recommend that psychologists set aside inner experience for practical purposes; it argues that the very idea of inner experience as an ontologically distinct category is the product

of a philosophical mistake, one which, once exposed, removes the appearance of any genuine mind-body problem requiring solution. Whether this diagnosis succeeds, or whether it merely relocates the problem it claims to dissolve, is examined in the section that follows.

Philosophical Objections to Behaviourism

Despite its considerable influence, behaviourism, in both its psychological and logical forms, has faced sustained philosophical criticism, criticism that falls broadly into three interrelated categories: objections from linguistic creativity, objections from private and qualitative experience, and objections from the possibility of behaviourally silent mental states.

The celebrated objection from linguistic creativity was advanced by Chomsky, in his review of Skinner's attempt to explain verbal behaviour entirely in terms of reinforcement history. Chomsky demonstrated that ordinary speakers routinely produce and understand novel sentences they have never previously encountered, sentences that cannot plausibly be explained as conditioned responses to prior stimuli, since no finite history of reinforcement can account for an essentially infinite generative capacity.⁵ If human linguistic behaviour, arguably among the most sophisticated forms of behaviour available to behaviourist analysis, cannot be adequately explained in stimulus-response terms, then the behaviourist programme faces a serious difficulty at precisely the point where its explanatory ambitions are most acute.

A second, closely related objection concerns the qualitative and first-person character of conscious experience, commonly discussed under the heading of qualia. Critics have long argued that behaviourist analyses, whether psychological or logical, systematically omit what it is like to undergo a given mental state, the subjective, felt quality of pain, of seeing red, or of tasting bitterness. Two persons may exhibit identical behavioural dispositions under identical circumstances while differing, in principle, in the qualitative character of their inner experience, a possibility behaviourism appears unable to accommodate, since its analytical resources are confined entirely to publicly observable behaviour.

The third objection, associated with the philosophical literature on private mental episodes, notes that a person may possess a belief, desire, or sensation that produces no behavioural manifestation whatsoever, whether because the person deliberately conceals it, lacks any occasion to act on it, or is physically incapable of the behaviour that would ordinarily express it. Such cases suggest that mental states cannot be exhaustively analysed in terms of actual or even hypothetical behaviour, since the very identification of the relevant behavioural disposition already presupposes, rather than explains, the mental state it is meant to analyse.

Balogun and Oyelakin, writing from within the African philosophical tradition on the nature of mind, offer a further, comparative perspective on this cluster of objections. Drawing on Yoruba conceptions of personhood, in which the person is constituted by a composite of physical and non-physical elements standing in complex interactive relation, they argue that purely behaviourist analyses of mind struggle to accommodate indigenous African understandings of consciousness, destiny, and inner moral agency, understandings that assign genuine explanatory weight to inner states not reducible to observable conduct.⁶ Their analysis suggests that the difficulties facing behaviourism are not merely artefacts of a

peculiarly Western philosophical vocabulary but recur, in modified form, across distinct philosophical traditions that take seriously the reality of inner mental life.

Behaviourism in Comparative and Contemporary Perspective

Contemporary philosophy of mind has not so much abandoned behaviourism as absorbed and transformed its central insights within newer theoretical frameworks, a development worth situating within both Western and African philosophical discourse.

Within the Western analytic tradition, Searle's critique of computational and behaviourist accounts of mind, developed through his well-known thought experiment concerning a person manipulating Chinese symbols according to a formal rule-book without understanding their meaning, demonstrates that the mere production of appropriate behavioural or symbolic outputs, however sophisticated, does not by itself guarantee the presence of genuine understanding or intentionality.⁷ Searle's argument, though originally directed against strong artificial intelligence, applies with equal force to behaviourism, since both positions attempt to characterise mentality entirely in terms of functional or behavioural output, without reference to the intrinsic, intentional character of mental states.

More scholarship has sought a middle path between the extremes of Cartesian dualism and eliminative behaviourism. Yanagawa and Matsui, in a recent comparative study, argue that radical behaviourism and enactivist philosophy of mind, despite their apparent theoretical opposition, share an implicit point of agreement in their treatment of action and behaviour as fundamentally embodied and environmentally embedded phenomena, rather than as mere external correlates of a separate inner cause.⁸ This convergence suggests that certain behaviourist insights concerning the embodied, situated character of mentality remain philosophically defensible even after the more extreme eliminativist ambitions of classical behaviourism have been abandoned.

Within African philosophy, the comparative volume edited by Attoe brings together African perspectives on mind, consciousness, and the relationship between physical constitution and mental agency, perspectives that neither straightforwardly endorse Cartesian dualism nor reduce mentality entirely to observable behaviour.⁹ Similarly, Camargo's recent examination of Cartesian dualism's contemporary relevance to psychology and mental health argues that neither an uncritical dualism nor a thoroughgoing behaviourism adequately captures the interdependence of physiological, behavioural, and subjective dimensions of mental disorder, a conclusion with direct implications for clinical practice as well as philosophical theory.¹⁰

Taken all significance lies less in having provided a complete and final theory of mind than in having established, permanently, the requirement that any adequate theory of mind must remain answerable to publicly observable evidence, even as it makes room, once again, for the inner, subjective, and intentional dimensions of mentality that classical behaviourism sought to eliminate.

Towards a Balanced Philosophical Assessment

The philosophical dissection undertaken in the preceding sections yields a balanced, rather than wholly dismissive, assessment of behaviourism's place in the philosophy of mind. On the credit side, behaviourism performed an indispensable disciplinary function, insisting that claims about mental states be answerable, at least in significant part, to publicly observable evidence, and thereby guarding philosophy of mind against the methodological excesses of unregulated introspectionism and against the explanatory vacuity of an unfalsifiable Cartesian dualism. Mendie and Udofia's critique of Cartesian interactionism, discussed earlier in this paper, illustrates precisely the kind of explanatory difficulty, namely, the problem of how a non-physical substance could causally affect a physical one, that behaviourism's insistence on publicly observable criteria was designed to circumvent.⁴

On the debit side, the objections examined in the fourth section demonstrate that behaviourism, whether psychological or logical, cannot provide a complete account of mentality without either tacitly reintroducing the very inner mental categories it claims to eliminate, or else implausibly denying the reality of linguistic creativity, qualitative experience, and behaviourally silent mental states. Balogun's analysis of African conceptions of personhood, which treats behavioural dispositions as significant but not exhaustive evidence of a person's underlying moral and metaphysical constitution, offers a philosophically instructive middle position.¹¹ On this view, behaviour remains an important, indeed indispensable, source of evidence for mental states, without being identical with, or reductively exhaustive of, those states themselves.

A philosophically adequate theory of mind, therefore, ought to retain behaviourism's methodological insistence on public evidence and empirical accountability while abandoning its more extreme ontological and semantic claims, namely, the claim that mental states simply are, without remainder, patterns of actual or dispositional behaviour. Such a theory would treat behaviour as an epistemically privileged, but not metaphysically exhaustive, window onto the mind, thereby preserving both the scientific respectability behaviourism sought and the subjective reality of mental life that behaviourism was, in the final analysis, unable to eliminate.

CONCLUSION

This paper has undertaken a philosophical dissection of behaviourism as an account of the human mind, examining its conceptual foundations, its historical development from Watson through Skinner to Ryle, and the principal objections advanced against it from the standpoints of linguistic creativity, qualitative experience, private mental states, and comparative African philosophy. The analysis has shown that behaviourism, in seeking to resolve the mind-body problem by denying the explanatory legitimacy of inner mental episodes, succeeded in disciplining psychological and philosophical inquiry but failed to provide a complete account of mentality.

The thesis defended throughout has been that behaviourism is methodologically valuable yet philosophically incomplete: valuable because it insists that theories of mind remain answerable to publicly observable evidence, incomplete because it cannot, without contradiction or evasion, accommodate the

first-person, qualitative, and creative dimensions of human mental life. The objections examined, ranging from Chomsky's critique of behaviourist accounts of language to comparative African analyses of personhood, converge on a single conclusion, namely, that mental states, however closely correlated with behaviour, are not simply reducible to behaviour without explanatory loss.

The balanced assessment offered in this paper suggests that the proper philosophical legacy of behaviourism lies not in its specific doctrines, most of which have been superseded, but in the enduring methodological standard it established, namely, that claims about the mind must be capable of some form of independent, evidential support. A philosophy of mind adequate to human experience must build upon this standard while restoring to mental life the inner, subjective reality that behaviourism, in its determination to achieve scientific respectability, was compelled to deny. It is in striking this balance, between empirical discipline and philosophical honesty about the nature of consciousness, that the future development of the philosophy of mind is likely to find its most productive path.

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