

## CORRESPONDENCE

Dear Sir,

May I express my disappointment and dismay at the profound misunderstanding of the radical behaviourist position expressed and implied in the last issue of the Bulletin (1975, 3, 3).

Firstly, in the editorial, it was suggested that we should not wish to call ourselves behaviourists, since "...this term is associated with Watson and Skinner who frowned upon the use of intervening variables as explanations of behaviour".

Presumably you wish to use the term 'intervening variable' in its broad sense as 'unobservable', and this being so, then it is a gross misrepresentation of Skinner's position. For over thirty years, Skinner has consistently referred to unobserved events in his discussions of the determination of behaviour, and he has put forward the view that these 'private events' are among the most interesting and important aspects of human behaviour. (Skinner, 1945, 1963).

To support your misrepresentation by the contention that physicists study atoms although they cannot see them (an analogy presumably borrowed from Sutherland's review) is facile.

There are two points here:

1. By your reckoning, Skinner should argue against the study of atomic and sub-atomic processes. He has not, because the nature of atomic processes has not been claimed to be something different in kind to the nature of (observable) matter, whereas many uses of intervening mental states do implicate a distinction of this type (Skinner, 1950). His position on those intervening states not making this distinction is that they are probably unnecessary, not inadmissible.

2. The study of nuclear processes has been shown to be an essential aspect of natural science, although there have been stages when this study was less essential for the understanding of molar processes. In behavioural science, too, we will arrive at the stage where we must reduce even further. This may be necessary, for example, to investigate Skinner's claims concerning the nature of private events, and it is certainly necessary to study the physiology of behaviour. When we reach this stage, behavioural science will be fully integrated as a branch of biology - a point often made by Skinner (Skinner, 1969) - just as astronomy (for example) is being integrated into the realms of natural science via an understanding of nuclear processes.

Even at this stage, however, physiological explanations must still be in accord with our data on behavioural processes, just as nuclear explanations cannot 'over-ride' astronomical laws and observations.

If you do not wish to be labelled as Skinnerians, then it should be on one or both of two major issues. Either you do not accept Skinner's original assumptions about behaviour (e.g. molar determinism, continuity of behaviour and private events etc.), or you dispute his interpretations of available data (e.g. as in Verbal Behaviour). Surely you cannot refuse the label on the grounds of a simplification and misrepresentation of his position.

My second point is a question - why reprint Sutherland's review? Without going into great detail, Sutherland showed, in a spectacular way, his ignorance of Skinner's work. Indeed, the piece is less of a book review, more of a diatribe - a vehicle for Sutherland to get off his chest years of bottled-up frustrations (how's that for an intervening variable?) against a man who has added infinitely more to the study of behaviour than Sutherland, while neglecting the very approach to which Sutherland has devoted himself.

There are other reviews available which make pertinent criticism while being generally unfavourable (if that is what was needed for the Bulletin) while there are even favourable reviews by very well-informed scientists (e.g. Blackman's review).

The last issue of the Bulletin was disappointing, since I would have thought that in the B.A.B.P. we have a nucleus of scientists who are, at least, favourable to behavioural psychology, and who are willing to discuss issues sensibly. It left me feeling not sure.

Yours faithfully,  
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#### References

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Skinner, B.F. Are theories of learning necessary? *Psychological Review*, 1950, 57, 193-216.  
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Dear Sir,

We are dismayed to find N.S. Sutherland's "review" of Skinner's "About Behaviourism" reprinted, without comment, in the last issue of the Bulletin. Sutherland's remarks could hardly be called constructive and he is often inaccurate; for example, he claims that the Skinnerian approach has led to "trivial" discoveries in the applied field. Even the briefest acquaintance with the literature must show such comment to be, at best, poorly informed.

Adequate rebuttal would require the dissection of the whole article sentence by sentence. Suffice it to say that Sutherland's understanding of Skinner's use of the terms "behaviourism" and "reinforcement" appear to be inconsistent with Skinner's actual usage.

More adequate and constructively critical reviews are available; see, for example, Blackman, D. *Times Higher Educational Supplement*; 28th March, 1975. Rachlin, H. in *Behaviour Therapy*; May, 1975, vol. 6, pp.437-440. Schnaitter, R. *Between Organism and Environment*. A review of B.F.