

Some objections to behaviorism

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In our discussion of Ryle, we already noted one problem for the behaviorist: namely, that behaviorists often say that mental states are logical constructions out of behavior without telling us exactly how the logical construction is supposed to work. This, as Putnam notes, is different from cases like the average taxpayer. But there are also other objections to behaviorism.

1 Putnam's argument against behaviorism

1.1 Behavior and analytic entailments

Putnam sets up his argument against behaviorism by introducing a distinction between analytic and synthetic entailments. For our purposes, we can simplify a bit and assimilate this distinction to a distinction we have already discussed: the distinction between necessary and contingent connections between statements. A good example of what Putnam calls a synthetic entailment is the following:

- 1. There is smoke coming out of that house.

- C. That house is on fire.

There is clearly some connection between these statements; if you knew that the first was true, that might give you good reason in at least lots of circumstances for thinking that the second was true. But the connection between them is only contingent. It is surely *possible* for the first to be true but the second false.

A standard example of what Putnam calls an analytic entailment is the following:

1. John is a bachelor.

C. John is unmarried.

Here the connection between the two is tighter than above; it does not seem possible for the first to be true and the second false. So there is a necessary connection between the two statements.

But what does this have to do with behaviorism? Putnam notes that different behaviorists hold different views, but that the essence of the view is that, in some sense, mental states are nothing over and above clusters of behavior, or clusters of dispositions to behavior. But if mental states just *are* behavioral patterns, then surely the connection between mental states and behavior should be *necessary*.

It helps here to compare behaviorism to our other examples of logical constructions. There is surely a necessary connection between claims about the average taxpayer and claims about individual taxpayers. So, if mental states are logical constructions out of behavior, there should be a necessary connection between claims about mental states and claims about the corresponding behavior.

This gives us a way to test the truth of behaviorism. If behaviorism is true about mental states in general, then there should be some necessary connection of the form:

1. John is in pain.

C. John engages in such-and-such behavior.

(where what ‘such-and-such behavior’ is is identified by the theory). Putnam’s argument is that there is no such necessary connection, and that therefore behaviorism is false.

He uses the analogy of the relationship between a disease and its symptoms. Ordinarily, we identify diseases by their symptoms. But we do not think of diseases as logical constructions out of symptoms; rather, the disease is one thing, and the symptoms something else. It’s just that the latter is evidence of the former. That is how Putnam thinks of the relationship between mental states and the behavior by which we typically identify those mental states in others.

1.2 *The examples of the super-spartans and the super-super-spartans*

Putnam’s argument is based on the following example:

“Let us now engage in a little science fiction. Let us try to describe some worlds in which pains are related to responses (and also to causes) in quite a different way than they are in our world. . . .

Imagine a community of ‘super-spartans’ or ‘super-stoics’ — a community in which the adults have the ability to successfully suppress *all* voluntary pain behavior. They may, on occasion, admit that they feel pain, but always in pleasant well-modulated voices . . . They do *not* wince, scream, flinch, sob, grit their teeth, clench their fists, exhibit beads of sweat, or otherwise act like

people in pain . . . However, they do feel pain, and they dislike it (just as we do)., They even admit that it takes a great effort of will to behave as they do.”

This scenario seems to be possible; so it seems to show that the link between pain and at least some pain behavior is contingent, rather than, as the behaviorist had claimed, necessary. But the behaviorist can reply that some links between pain and behavior remain intact, even in this scenario:

1. The connection between pain and verbal behavior.
2. The connection between pain and the behavior of young children, before they have trained to be super-spartans.

In response, Putnam imagines the super-super-spartans:

“...let us undertake the task of trying to imagine a world in which there are not even pain *reports*. I will call this world the ‘*X*-world’. In the *X*-world we have to deal with ‘super-super-spartans.’ These have been super-spartans for so long, that they have begun to suppress even *talk* of pain. Of course, each individual *X*-worlder may have his private way of thinking about pain. He may even have the word ‘pain’ (as before, I assume that these beings are born fully acculturated). He may *think* to himself: ‘This pain is intolerable. If it goes on one minute longer I shall scream. Oh No! I mustn’t do that! That would disgrace my whole family . . .’ But *X*-worlders do not even admit to *having* pains. They pretend not to know either the world or the phenomenon to which it refers. In short, if pains are ‘logical constructions out of behavior’, then our *X*-worlders behave so as not to have pains! — Only, of course, they do have pains, and they know perfectly well that they have pains.

If this last fantasy is not, in some disguised way, self-contradictory, then logical behaviorism is simply a mistake.” (334)

Can the behaviorist reply that the super-super-spartans don’t really feel pain? How does Putnam reply?

2 Behaviorism and self-knowledge

Recall that it was one of Ryle’s arguments against dualism that it makes it impossible to know, or even reasonably believe, anything about the mental states of other people. (This was ‘the problem of other minds.’) Earlier, we considered several responses to this argument.

Now, Ryle is certainly right that dualist views about knowledge of other minds can sound odd. But Ryle’s own view also seems to run into problems about knowledge of mental states. Interestingly, the problems that it generates are not about knowledge of the mental

states of others, but rather about knowledge of one's own mental states. Consider the following passage:

“If we now raise the epistemologist's question, ‘How does a person find out what mood he is in?’ we can answer that . . . he finds it out very much as we find it out. As we have seen, he does not groan ‘I feel bored’ because he has found out that he is bored, any more than the sleepy man yawns because he has found out that he is sleepy. Rather, somewhat as the sleepy man finds out that he is sleepy by finding that, among other things, he keeps on yawning, so the bored man finds out that he is bored, if he does find this out, by finding that among other things he glumly says to others and to himself ‘I feel bored’ and ‘How bored I feel.’ ” (*The Concept of Mind*, pp. 102-103)

Is this a plausible view about knowledge of moods? Would it also be a plausible view about knowledge of beliefs and intentions? How about bodily sensations?

Compare again pains to other uncontroversial examples of logical constructions. Could one know facts about the average taxpayer without knowing facts about individual taxpayers?

This brings out something about the dualist view that seems right: the way that we know about our own mental states is different than the way that we know about the mental states of others.

3 Behaviorism and mental causation

Ironically, Ryle's other main argument against dualism — that it can make no sense of causation of behavior by mental states — can also be turned into an argument against behaviorism.

As we discussed in connection with dualism, we often make claims about mental states causing actions — as in the claim that I walked down the hall because I desired some coffee. But can explanations like this be squared with the idea that mental states are logical constructions clusters of behavior, or dispositions to certain kinds of behavior?

Compare this explanation: the glass broke when it hit the ground because it is prone to break when it hits a hard surface. Is this the kind of explanation we are giving when we, for example, say that someone is crying because he is in pain?