

BEHAVIOURISM

Rowland Stout

Behaviourists take the view that mental states are essentially behavioural: to be in pain, for example, is just to behave, or be disposed to behave, in certain ways (to writhe and go 'Ow!', and so on). Behaviourism, if true, would neatly explain how mind and body are related. Minds are not queer, ethereal entities that exist in addition to our physical bodies, and that are hidden behind our behaviour. Rather, to have a mind just is to be disposed to behave in certain ways, and that is something even a physical object can be. Nowadays behaviourism, as a philosophy of mind, is philosophically out of fashion. But here, Rowland Stout explains why he still believes it may be true.

The central claim of philosophical behaviourism is this: what it is to be in a certain state of mind is to be disposed to behave in a certain way. Most philosophers think that this claim is obviously false. They also think it is offensive. They think it is offensive because it appears to reduce or eliminate what is most valuable to us — our minds. It puts the notion of behaviour in the place of mind, and so removes what distinguishes us from automata. B. F. Skinner, one of the most famous (notorious) behaviourists, thought that behaviourism was a tool for social control, albeit a very liberal sort of control. He thought that by understanding how to condition people's behaviour we would know how to achieve a better society.

Understood this way, I agree that behaviourism would be offensive. A behaviourist should not aim to belittle the mind, let alone eliminate it. Behaviourism, when properly formulated, should allow us to say truly all the things we feel we must say about the mind. In particular, behaviourism should be no threat to free will, consciousness or individuality. Behaviourism should not be seen as a way to reduce or eliminate our talk of minds, but as a way to understand such talk.

Some behaviourists have thought that the mind was an illusion and that reference to it was bad science. This is known as revisionary behaviourism since it advocates revising our ways of talking about the mind. But most behaviourists have not thought this. The two most influential figures in philosophical behaviourism — Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein — had an almost exaggerated respect for ordinary language. They thought that their approach (which they both usually refused to call 'behaviourist' just to avoid this very misinterpretation of their views) was the way to avoid a revisionary theory of the mind.

But anti-behaviourist philosophers have argued that even if actual philosophical behaviourists have not acknowledged their commitment to denying the reality of free will, consciousness, etc. they are nevertheless committed to that denial. This is because we can imagine a creature that behaves (and is disposed to behave) in exactly the same way that we do, but has no conscious mind and no free will. The creature is in short a zombie (by the way, a philosophical zombie does not behave in outlandish and frightening ways. They behave just like normal people; that is what makes them so scary). Behaviourists, by only considering how we are disposed to behave, put us on a par with zombies, and so must in all consistency deny the reality of our conscious minds, free will, etc.

This argument is a good example of the familiar logical fallacy called begging the question. In this fallacy you implicitly assume the thing you are arguing for as a premise in your argument, and so argue in a circle. The behaviourists claim that having a conscious mind is a matter of being disposed to behave in a certain way. So the behaviourists deny that it is possible to be disposed to behave in exactly the same way as someone with a conscious mind and yet not have a conscious mind. The anti-behaviourist argument that assumes the logical possibility of zombies assumes the falsity of behaviourism at the very beginning of the argument.

But the anti-behaviourist may think that there is independent plausibility in the idea that zombies are logically possible. They may say that we can tell consistent, worked-out stories in which

zombies figure. These stories, they say, can be worked out to any level of detail and no contradiction will emerge.

But let us consider these stories a bit. One of them is the science fiction story of androids — robots made out of organic material that are programmed to function just like humans. But most people who like to think about androids think of them as having conscious minds. An android might, as in the film *Blade Runner*, be unaware that he/she/it is an android and be horrified to discover it. These are not the states and responses of something without a conscious mind. It is very difficult to think of an effective android where all is darkness within. When you talk to them, play with them, make them laugh, or fall in love with them, you cannot help but see them as conscious beings.

Perhaps a better scenario for the anti-behaviourist is that told in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Here we have a story where people are killed by aliens who then take over exact replicas of their bodies. The aliens put up a very good pretence of being those people, behaving in almost all ways just like them. As it happens the aliens are not very good at faking emotional responses, but this just confuses the story for our purposes. We can suppose that they are such good actors that they cannot be found out unless they want to be.

But the whole point about these zombies is that they are pretending. Pretending is the exercise of a conscious faculty of the mind. They may lack normal human emotions, and in this respect be more like human psychopaths. But they have conscious goals and they are conscious of their environment. And, although they lack normal human emotions, they do not lack emotions of any sort. After all they are desperately keen to take over the world. And, of course, they are not disposed to behave in exactly the way we are. They only behave like us in our company when they are putting on the pretence. But the pretence is embedded in a way of life that is not at all like ours, involving as it does dedication to the goals of nurturing their pods and killing all humans.

A pretence is only a pretence if it is embedded in a non-pretending way of behaving that gives the pretence its point. For

the zombie story to work properly the pretence must be total, and this is a contradiction in terms. A total pretence would not be a pretence at all, but a way of life in its own right.

David Chalmers, in his book *The Conscious Mind*, writes that the logical possibility of zombies is obvious to him. 'A zombie is just something physically identical to me, but which has no conscious experience – all is dark inside.'¹ We must not forget that this zombie would have just written a 414 page book on consciousness. It can't have been easy doing that, all being dark inside.

But perhaps we do not need to go as far as zombies to find an argument against behaviourism. Hilary Putnam in his paper 'Brains and Behaviour'² presents the science fiction example of the *Super-Spartans*, who have a profound pride about suffering pain uncomplainingly. They do not squirm or scream or even move away from the pain source except in a deliberate attempt to avoid their body suffering damage. In the end they drop any talk of pain from their language. According to Putnam, the Super-Spartans still feel pain even though there is no associated behavioural disposition.

But behaviourism only claims that to be in a state of mind — e.g. pain — is to be disposed to behave in certain ways. You may be disposed to behave in certain ways even when you do not behave in these ways in the actual circumstances. For example, I may keep my feelings to myself, but would express them in the right circumstances. If it were completely all right to express my pain I would be screaming and writhing, but as it is I am still and silent. I am disposed to behave in certain ways even though I do not produce any of the bits of behaviour that go with these ways of behaving. The point about the Super-Spartans is that they have a reason to repress their pain behaviour. If that reason lapsed, then they would express it. That is all that is required for the behaviourist.

The real problem for behaviourism would arise if it were possible to be in a state of pain and yet to be such that you had no disposition at all to behave in a characteristically pained way. No matter what the circumstances, you will not express your pain behaviourally. At this point in the story I think the

behaviourist should cast some doubt on the reality of the pain. Think of how we describe pain. For example I might say that my pain is unbearably bad. This means it is such that I cannot bear it stoically. Not being able to bear a pain is a fact about how you are disposed to behave. So it makes no sense to say of the Super-Super-Spartan who has no disposition at all to behave in a pained way that their pain is unbearable. Extending this argument we might be able to make it plausible that it makes no sense to say that they have a pain as such at all, since pain just is that state which in extreme forms is unbearable.

Galen Strawson extends the example of creatures who feel pain without being disposed to express it to creatures who have sensations, emotions, beliefs, and desires at the same time as being 'constitutionally incapable of any sort of behaviour, as this is ordinarily understood.'³ He calls them Weather Watchers since their abiding interest in life is the weather. Once in their youth they moved about, and the behaviourist would have no problem in attributing to young Weather Watchers a mental life. But as they get older they become more rooted (literally) and passive, until they stop altogether.

Since we can imagine ourselves sitting quite still, passively watching the weather and having feelings, emotions and beliefs about it, why can't we imagine the Weather Watchers, who have fallen into this passive state as their only way of life?

Answering that rhetorical question is a major challenge for a behaviourist. Strawson accepts that his anti-behaviourist examples are question-begging, but they serve to articulate the discussion. The challenge for the behaviourist is to show that a proper understanding of what it is to feel pain, emotions, have beliefs, intentions and to see, hear and feel things involves realizing that these are all aspects of behavioural dispositions. It may not be intuitively clear at the outset whether the Weather Watchers are genuinely intelligible. The behaviourist must show that they are not intelligible by providing an intuitively compelling behaviourist account of the mind.

Some people think that we do not have to go to science fiction to find examples of pain without any behavioural disposi-

tion. There is a website called www.anaesthesiaawareness.com dedicated to alerting people of the dangers of being awake and in agony but paralysed during operations involving general 'anaesthetic'. Anaesthetists, for entirely good reasons, generally try to give patients the lowest dose of anaesthetic they can get away with. In about 1% of operations, insufficient anaesthetic is given, but because the drugs that are given by the anaesthetist paralyse the patient, the medical staff are unaware that the patient is in pain. For the patient this results in anything from the ability to remember aspects of the operation under hypnosis to the following experience from the person running this website:

I came out of the operating room screaming at the top of my lungs that I was awake while they took my eye out. ... I was as awake, alert, and aware during the removal of an eye as I am now, as I write this, but I could do nothing to communicate my awareness.

This sort of report might be regarded as providing good evidence that the patient was conscious during the operation, although the possibility of a vivid nightmare during the operation should not be ruled out especially given the anxiety that anyone would feel about such an operation. But if the amnesic effects of the anaesthetists' drugs are good enough there should be no such report, and there may not even be the so-called 'implicit memory' that hypnosis would uncover. There may be no post-operative stress at all. But does that mean the patient was not really in pain or shock? If they had not been paralysed but had only had the amnesic effects of their drugs, we would say that they had been in pain but forgotten about it. We would be forced to say this by the evidence of their screams during the operation. Paralysis by itself does not eliminate pain, just some of the symptoms of pain. Amnesia by itself does not eliminate pain, just some other symptoms. Both together may eliminate all the symptoms, but, since the pain itself is untouched by either component, why should it be eliminated by both of them together?

It is a good test of one's trust in a certain sort of behaviourism whether one would undergo an operation knowing that the anaesthetist was only using a very effective paralysing agent combined with a very effective amnesic agent. But perhaps the behaviourist does not need to deny that they would be in pain in such an operation. For there is still a sense in which they would be disposed to scream and writhe about. That is that if they were physically able to express their feelings behaviourally this is what they would do. In the same sort of way a sugar cube that is wrapped in cellophane is still soluble — i.e. disposed to dissolve in water — even though if you drop it in water it will not dissolve. If it is exposed naked to water it will dissolve. Likewise a behaviourist might say that to be in pain is to be disposed to behave in certain characteristically pained ways if it is both appropriate and possible to do so.

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Notes

¹ D. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 96.

² In H. Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers vol 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

³ G. Strawson, *Mental Reality* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1994), p. 151.

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