

The Religious Psychology Student in a Behaviorology Course

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Introduction

As a professor of behaviorology I taught a comprehensive general behaviorology course to beginning graduate students, many of whom were educational psychology majors. I often encountered the kind of deeply religious students who are attracted to disciplinary mixes like psychology that tolerate metaphysical assumptions within their paradigmatic conceptual frameworks. Such students arrived in my course prepared to rely, as they often did in their psychology courses, on their repertoires in metaphysics. Before long in my behaviorology course they found themselves confronting the incompatibility of the religious/metaphysical paradigm and the natural science paradigm of behaviorology. When such students submitted papers laced with metaphysical ideas where a science student would have been expected to provide behaviorological analyses, I would respond to those students with letters of which the following is a typical example.

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Your paper, and the class discussion that followed its presentation, raised some complex issues about training for the natural sciences. It also presented me with a dilemma of sorts. Let me explain.

This is a basic course in a natural science and in the behaviorological engineering that derives from it. It is not a survey course *about* the discipline of behaviorology; it is a course *in* behaviorology. The difference is important. This training is provided because a person seeking a doctorate in a behavior-related discipline such as education is expected to operate professionally *as* a behavioral engineer. In short, in entering into a program in education, you are not merely here to gain some insight into how behaviorologists think and practice (in the sense that you would then be prepared merely to *describe* those phenomena). Rather, you are here to be trained in how to operate that way yourself—in the same sense that a person planning a career in geology would take geology courses

to learn how to think and act like a geologist. The distinction is illustrated in comparisons between (a) survey courses taught to non-majors to *familiarize* them with a field or discipline and (b) training courses taken by majors to render them capable of operating as practitioners *of* their disciplines.

As a student who comes to higher education with concepts of human behavior based on traditional religious assumptions and principles, you are finding, as have students down through recent centuries, that religion and natural science do not provide compatible ways of thinking. There is a very real basis for the long-standing tension between their advocates. An extensive body of literature elaborates on the antithetical nature of those contrasting paradigms, but even here in our course you find yourself confronting some of the implications of those differences.

This being the United States of America, one's personal right to believe *anything* is constitutionally protected. But in a natural science course designed to prepare students to operate as engineers *on the basis of* that basic natural science, the student cannot validly receive academic credit for substituting religious verbal behavior for scientific verbal behavior in the conceptual analyses that constitute the natural science subject matter. To cite one classic example that has arisen from time to time, a student whose religious training has predisposed the person to believe that the earth was spontaneously created by metaphysical forces only a few thousand years ago could not substitute a declaration to that effect for the corresponding alternative training products required in the formal study of paleontology and stratigraphy—and then, demand grades of A in those geology courses on the grounds that First Amendment rights permit that kind of substitution without adverse consequence.

In your paper, feelings and personal autonomy are implicitly denoted as properties of what seems to be an autonomous self. I assume from what you have written in this paper and said in class that this self-entity is the familiar human spirit that is posited, within the Judean-Christian religions, (a) to inhabit the body, (b) in some versions to account for its life function, and (c) to serve as the somewhat spontaneous origin of much of its behavior. You have rather explicitly characterized "feelings" as manifestations of that sort of ethereal entity—perhaps as a kind of indicator of its presence. You assign to feelings the role of guide by which the self-entity determines the kind of directions that it should give to the body. In some versions, conversely, the will of the spirit is manifested in the form of feelings that, in turn, somehow guide the body. And you have described verbal phenomena such as choosing and decision-making as further manifestations of that self-spirit. Such views, I believe, represent what is taught under the umbrella of the reli-

gious agencies from which you report having received extensive training throughout your lifetime.

The problem here is that within the natural science of behaviorology such events as feelings are explained as the inevitable respondent products of specific behavioral processes that occur both naturally or by engineering design. Given that that is demonstrably true, it is redundant to insist that feelings are of metaphysical origin. While they are entirely real, feelings, like all real events, are *part of the natural behavior-controlling environment*. That they themselves are behavioral effects, or that they occur *within* the body are irrelevant, because behavior can be controlled functionally by any kind of real events occurring on either side of the skin—as when, for example, one says truthfully “I’m feeling grief about the death of my goldfish,” a remark occurring under partial stimulus control of a feeling.

Already in this introductory course, we have studied the relevant basic principles and the engineering strategies by which any *one* ...can be made to feel any *way* ...about any *thing*. There is nothing mysterious about feelings or about the circumstances that give rise to them. Neither of us, as far as I know, is a deity. Yet, as an ordinary behavioral engineer, I can (at least in theory) arrange for anybody to have any feeling with respect to anything. And as a student of behaviorology who is acquiring this science and engineering, so presumably can you. From an objective behaviorological scientific perspective, it is clearly redundant to say that one’s feelings are manifestations of a metaphysical self that is making known its intentions as to how it’s host’s body should behave. Rather, one’s feelings are certain physiological effects that one’s prior conditioning has left one preconfigured to experience inevitably upon later encounters with certain kinds of events. And in many cases the behavioral engineers with whom one has previously interacted have arranged that kind of preconfiguring deliberately—a role often filled by parents, relatives, friends, teachers, or religious leaders. The affected person would therefore be better served by asking *who* performed that behavior engineering and *why* it was done—and how well he or she, as its product, is *now* being served by that endowed capacity for pre-engineered emotional respondents.

When, instead, you accept the traditional religious/psychological position on feelings and substitute that kind of analysis for the kind of analysis of feelings taught within the behaviorology discipline, it *is* good religion, and it is typically *acceptable* in psychology insofar as psychology students are seldom if ever disabused of such notions and are sometimes taught a secular version of that same thing. But it is *not* good natural science.

Or consider another example: You assert or imply the autonomy of an indwelling human presence—the semi-autonomous decision-making self. But you offer as evi-

dence of both its presence and function a class of operant verbal behavior—specifically that involved in what you call personal choosing or decision-making. You seem to be suggesting (as I understand your position) that a person’s announcement of a decision is a voice from the autonomous self-spirit within. You mentioned that you construed reasoning and problem solving to differentiate man from other animals—a long-standing concept generally featured in religious training. However, from a biological natural-science perspective, while human beings have a genetically structured body that facilitates verbal behavior better than the body of any other known species, the bodies of some other species permit rudimentary or incipient forms of such verbal operant behavior, and no strict demarcation on that characteristic can be demonstrated for the human species.

Here, with respect to the paper that you have submitted, a problem arises when, in this behaviorology course, which exists to train students to perform behaviorological analyses, you substitute the kinds of superstitiously informed analyses that are discussed in this letter for the behaviorological analyses of the behavior-related subject matter. In a natural science of behavior, the phenomena that we call *decision-making* are behavioral events, mostly of the verbal kind. So far as behaviorological scientists have reason to know, those events consist *entirely* of behaviors, and no other assumptions seem necessary to explain them. As with all behaviors, they are functionally controlled, and in each case those functional relations are theoretically demonstrable. In the case of verbal operants involved in decision-making and problem-solving, the antecedent controls often consist of other verbal events. The causal chain can be traced, as always, not to some mysterious internal locus of metaphysical intervention, but to other domains of the behavior-controlling environment, including, subsequently, those outside the body. The verbal operants involved in “choosing” can be conditioned and shaped by processes that are made to occur through behaviorological engineering. Our present course is a first course in the curriculum devoted to how, exactly, that sort of thing is done.

Thus, within the natural science of behaviorology those verbal phenomena that you describe as “making a personal choice” cannot validly be withdrawn from the *scientific* analysis and reserved as evidence for a metaphysical self. To engage in such a departure from the scientific paradigm (as was also the case with your treatment of feelings) you must simply ignore big chunks of our behaviorological subject matter. Again, doing so represents good religious thought. And from all that I have seen, it is also widely acceptable (or widely tolerated) in the often non-natural, semi-scientific, semi-scientistic disciplinary mix called *psychology*. But it does not represent acceptable natural science—in particular, behaviorology, which

features an entirely different paradigmatic perspective on those kinds of events.

I would not want to penalize anyone for using an occasion such as this to explore and develop his or her own concepts on the theme topic. And you are entitled to your beliefs. However, in this case, as a basic science teacher, I have specified that this particular training exercise, occurring as it does *as part of a basic science course*, must reflect objective *scientific* thinking about the issues. At issue with respect to your involvement in this course is whether or not *you can do that*. That you may have become convinced that natural-scientific thought should not happen with respect to human behavior remains irrelevant to your involvement in this course.

Your course syllabus provided samples of the grading form for this course activity, which lists “scientific merit of paper” as one of the important criteria by which such presentations are to be evaluated. Accordingly, I have deducted some credit in the category of “scientific merit”, because your good religion (and apparently acceptable

psychology) is not good natural science—in particular, in this case, not good behaviorology. Insofar as your paper did contain some valid scientific points, the deduction in that category was only three of the six possible points, which resulted in an overall grade of 85% on this exercise. The loss of that 15% on this one activity amounts to a decrease in your total course credit of six-tenths of one percent. I don’t want to belabor the trivial, but for the price of a miniscule portion of course credit, you get a first-hand introduction to a complex and little understood intracultural conflict—a real bargain as the education dollar stretches today!✻

Endnotes

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