

Handout #3: Putnam's Critique of Behaviorism

1. Varieties of Behaviorism

Ontological Behaviorism: (1) Object: The mind just is a set of behaviors or dispositions to behavior. (2) Property: Being in pain just is being disposed to behave in ways w1-wn. (The same goes for believing that grass is green, wanting a cold drink, and all the other psychological properties.)

Analytic Behaviorism: Talk of the mind is synonymous with, analyzable in terms of, or reducible to talk of behavior or dispositions to behave in certain ways. (1) "John has a sharp mind," *means the same as* (or is in some perhaps weaker sense *equivalent to*) "John will solve most of the mathematical problems that you give to him, deliver witty remarks in appropriate contexts, ...". (2) "John is in pain," means the same as "John is disposed to say 'ouch', withdraw from his current situation, ..."

Methodological Behaviorism: The mind may be the brain, or it may be something distinct from the brain. Psychological kinds or categories may just be neurobiological kinds or categories, or they may be irreducibly mental. In either event, the best way to study, explain, and predict human behavior is to treat whatever mediates between stimulus and response as a "black box." For the purposes of science, we should think and talk about nothing but stimuli, behavior, and dispositions to such.

Note: Putnam's main target is *analytic behaviorism*, but his arguments impugn the two other varieties as well.

2. Sources of Behaviorism

A. The Rejection of Dualism Coupled with the Purported Nonsense of Materialism

Suppose we reject dualism because we think it is incompatible with a naturalistic view of the world and the scientific belief (or guiding assumption) that consciousness arose from the interaction between the complex properties of unconscious things or mechanisms at some point in the evolution of various animal lineages (or even earlier in the history of life on Earth). But suppose that we think, in spite of Smart's arguments to the contrary, that the identity theory is nonsense. For instance, we might argue that *thinking about bananas* cannot be identical to some *neuronal process* because the latter has spatial properties that cannot be attributed to the former. (The neuronal process occurs in a particular region of space and so has a particular size, but does it make sense to say that your thought about bananas has that size?) Thus, we might conclude, thought and talk about thoughts and experiences must have a different "logic" than thought and talk about objects that move through space over time. It is what Ryle calls a "category mistake" to assert either dualism or the identity theory. We do not use psychological vocabulary to refer to *inner things* of either the non-physical (mental/spiritual) or the physical

(biological or electrochemical) sort. Instead, we must use it to refer to *outer things* of an easily observable sort. Psychological vocabulary must be “shorthand” for behavior and dispositions to such.

B. The Problem of Other Minds

(1) Knowledge: How do I know that other people have pains, pleasures, thoughts, desires and aversions? Perhaps they only behave as if they do, when really they have no inner lives at all. They might be “zombies.”

Behaviorist Response: What it is to feel pain and pleasure, have thoughts, desires and aversions is just to behave in certain ways. So it is impossible for the skeptical scenario described above to be true. Zombies are impossible.

(2) Concepts: How do I know that other people mean by ‘pain’, ‘pleasure’, ‘thought’, ‘desire’ and ‘aversion’ what I mean when I use these terms? Maybe, for example, they mean by ‘pleasure’ what I mean by ‘pain’, but they are attracted to pain whereas I am attracted to pleasure.

Behaviorist Response: This is impossible. I learned the word ‘pain’ by observing my aversive behaviors and the aversive behaviors of others, and hearing the word ‘pain’ uttered as these behaviors were indicated to me. So ‘pain’ must just mean ‘aversive behavior’ (or ‘disposition to aversive behavior’). If ‘pain’ just means this, then it is impossible that someone exhibit aversive behaviors that he says are produced by ‘pain’ when he is really referring to the feeling that I call ‘pleasure’. We’re both referring to the same outwardly observable behavior or dispositions to exhibit such behavior.

Putnam’s Response—Scientific Realism: Behaviorism is an overreaction to skepticism. Every item of scientific knowledge is underdetermined by the observational evidence. And all scientific knowledge can be subjected to skeptical doubt. But the right response is not to argue that theoretical terms are *definable* in observational terms or to insist that theoretical entities are *constructs* out of observable entities. Instead, theoretical entities (like electrons and the like) are real things that explain the outward phenomena that they *cause*, and we learn of them through their *effects*. When we discover a new way to detect them, or the flaws in an old way of detecting them, this does not change the meaning of the term we use to denote the thing in question. Instead, new tests can lead to new knowledge of the very thing we were talking about all along. Thus, brain science may be able to give us new knowledge of the very minds and mental phenomena we know through introspection (i.e. thoughts, sensations and the like).

3. Weak Behaviorism

Might there a *logical* or *conceptual* entailment between being in a particular mental state (e.g. pain) and exhibiting certain kinds of behavior or (weaker still) having certain behavioral dispositions? For instance, it may be impossible to be in pain without being

disposed to exhibit the kinds of aversive behavior that we attribute to pain. If this is impossible, then even though pain is not just a disposition to behave in certain ways, it cannot be essentially non-physical, as there will be no possible world in which people (or their minds) are in pain, but no physical behavior is realized.

Putnam's counter-example to weak behaviorism: The "superspartans." Is this example coherent?