Behaviorism, Philosophical Conception of

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According to behaviorism, everything there is to know or say about people with regard to their mental states can be known or said in terms of the their observable behaviors (including verbal behaviors), and further, all there is to mental states themselves are certain patterns of behavior or dispositions to behave. The three core claims of behaviorism are, respectively, an epistemological claim (mental states are knowable only via behavior), a semantic claim (mental-state words like "belief" have meanings definable in terms of behavior), and a metaphysical claim (either that there are no mental states, just behaviors and dispositions to behave, or that there are mental states, but they are identical to behaviors or dispositions to behave). Behaviorism as a movement in philosophy overlapped partially with a movement of the same name in psychology. This entry discusses philosophical behaviorism by discussing its history and some of the major arguments, both pro and con.

History of Philosophical Behaviorism

Philosophical behaviorism emerged from logical positivism and ordinary-language philosophy. Positivists believed in verificationism, according to which the meaning of a term is given by specifying the observable conditions that would verify its application. Ordinary-language philosophers were suspicious of philosophical theses such as dualism that were not stated in the terms of ordinary language. In the philosophy of mind, especially in the 20th century, many philosophers saw behaviorism as a viable early contender for a materialistic solution to the mind-body problem. Few contemporary philosophers of mind attracted to mind-
body materialism subscribe to behaviorism, preferring instead one of its successors, such as functionalism and the mind-brain identity theory. While controversy surrounds applying the label of "behaviorist" to the philosophers who are often cited as being behaviorists, such citations occur frequently enough to merit mentioning as key behaviorists the philosophers Gilbert Ryle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, W. V. O. Quine, and Daniel Dennett.

**Motivating Behaviorism**

The Private Language Argument from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* has behavioristic conclusions. Wittgenstein attacked the alleged privacy of mental states. The conclusion of Wittgenstein’s argument is that it is impossible for there to be a language that referred only to private things: A language about sensations that could only be understood by a single person. Suppose you devise a language in which there is a sign, “S,” that you intend to stand for a particular sensation. According to Wittgenstein, no one, not you and not anyone else, can distinguish between a correct usage and a mere *seemingly correct* usage of “S.” However, where one cannot grasp a distinction between correct and incorrect uses, there is no place for a notion of correctness at all. Thus “S,” as well as the rest of the signs in this so-called private language, is meaningless.

Another line of thought with behavioristic conclusions is based on the verificationism central to logical positivism according to which terms are defined by the evidence for their correct application. Given that the main evidence we have for correctly applying terms like “belief” and “desire” is behavioral, verificationism entails that the meaning of such terms is definable in terms of behavior.
Against Behaviorism

One objection to behaviorism hinges on qualia, the subjective aspects of our conscious mental states, especially sensory states like seeing a red rose. If behaviorism is true, then it ought to be inconceivable for two beings to share all of their behavioral dispositions but differ in what qualia accompany their sensory interactions with roses (e.g., that the way roses look to the one differs from the way they look to the other). However, since such a situation is conceivable, behaviorism is false.

A second objection to behaviorism is based on the claim that it is part of our concepts of mental states that they can serve as causal explanations of behavior. For instance, one’s opening of a refrigerator is explained causally by appeal to one’s beliefs and desires (say, a desire to drink beer and a belief that there is beer in the refrigerator). However, by defining “belief” and “desire” by reference to such behaviors, behaviorism renders such explanations unacceptably circular.

A third objection to behaviorism is based on the claim that mental states cannot be individually connected with behaviors, but can only be connected to behaviors in concert with other mental states. Whether a person’s desire to avoid tiger attacks will result in her running away from a tiger instead of toward it (or not running at all) depends on her beliefs about where the nearest tiger is and whether it is more likely to attack a stationary person or a running one. The problem is that the project of saying which behavior a mental state is connected to is so complicated as to be totally intractable. Worse, the project of behavioral definition is thereby
shown to be circular. Each of mental state can only be connected to behavior by reference to other mental states, including the mental state that we started with, and thus we are led in a circle.

A fourth objection is the perfect actor objection. For any set of behaviors one might engage in while in a mental state, a perfect actor can perform those very same behaviors without being in that mental state. Well-trained actors know techniques to help them appear sad even when they aren’t actually sad. Thus, for any given mental state, no set of behavioral dispositions is essentially associated with it.

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See also Behaviorism in Psychological Explanation; Logical Positivism/Logical Empiricism; Mind-Body Relation; Philosophical Psychology, history of; Verificationism.


