

## **The force and weakness of behaviouristic explanation: the case of religious belief**

*La fuerza y debilidad de la explicación conductista:  
el caso de la creencia religiosa*

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### **Abstract**

"Behaviourism" is used in two different ways: to denote a particular school in psychology and to refer to a specific philosophical trend. The former puts forward genuine explanations but of a purely mechanical kind, while the second incorporates elements which behaviourism by itself can neither reconstruct nor explain, like conventions, intentions, contexts, meanings and so on. In this paper I argue that although in general behaviourism does provide genuine explanations, it is nevertheless essentially incomplete, for two main reasons. First, behaviourism is unable to give a satisfactory account of self-ascriptions of psychological states and, secondly, it presupposes a framework only within which its explanations can fully apply to human beings. I try to show that things are as I suggest by considering the specific case of religious belief, along the Wittgensteinian account of the latter.

Key words: meaning, first-person, language, belief, context, convention, religion, Wittgenstein.

### **Resumen**

"Conductismo" se usa de dos maneras diferentes: para denotar una escuela particular en la psicología y para referirse a una tendencia filosófica específica. La primera propone explicaciones genuinas pero de un tipo puramente mecánico, mientras que la segunda incorpora elementos que el conductismo por sí

mismo no puede reconstruir o explicar, como las convenciones, las intenciones, los contextos, los significados y así por el estilo. En este trabajo, sostengo que aunque, en lo general, el conductismo proporciona explicaciones genuinas, a pesar de ello es esencialmente incompleto, por dos razones principales. Primero, el conductismo es incapaz de dar cuenta satisfactoriamente de las auto-adscripciones de los estados psicológicos y, en segundo lugar, presupone un marco de referencia dentro del cual sus explicaciones pueden aplicarse a los seres humanos solamente. Intento mostrar que las cosas son como sugiero, considerando el caso específico de la creencia religiosa, con base en la concepción wittgenstaniana de esta última.

Palabras clave: significado, primera persona, lenguaje, creencia, contexto, convención, religión, Wittgenstein

1. I think that even the most unrepentant opponents of behaviourism recognize that it is a school or a trend of thought to which, in spite of its deficiencies and limitations, somehow we should all be grateful. Not only did behaviourism enrich psychology by putting forward new methods and new explanatory principles, but it also represented a new perspective in the philosophy of mind, for it incorporated (even if not wholly correct and almost never explicitly) a new theory of meaning for psychological words, thus providing a new account of sensations, feelings, memories, thoughts, beliefs and so on. So there is a sense in which, even if we do not share all the positions advocated by behaviourists, behaviourism itself will always be a collection of views which has to be taken seriously and cannot simply be ignored. Ludwig Wittgenstein points to one reason why we shall always feel sympathy for behaviourism, namely, that it denies or rejects certain myths concerning human beings. He equates behaviourism in the philosophy of psychology with finitism in the philosophy of mathematics: "Finitism and behaviourism are quite similar trends. Both say, but surely, all we have here is.... Both deny the existence of something, both with a view to escaping from a confusion" L. Wittgenstein,<sup>1</sup>. Just as the philosopher of mathematics inspired by a "robust sense of reality" tries to get rid of the mythical Cantorian realm of transfinite sets, so the behaviourist is engaged in a ruthless war against mentalism and in particular against Cartesianism, the conception of the mind as a special kind of substance to be found somewhere inside the body. Now if that were all behaviourism consisted in, many people

1. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: the M.I.T. Press, 1975), 11-18.

would be prepared to admit that they are behaviourists. Unfortunately there is more to it and so we have to turn now to the less attractive side of this - on the whole healthy - scientific movement.

2. I think we should start by acknowledging that there exists a certain confusion having to do with the nature of behaviourism. Usually, when people speak of behaviourism they (let me please use the expression) have in mind a particular school of psychology which, even if it lacks the desirable unity which many sciences possess, is nevertheless characterized by a certain approach, certain methods, a particular vocabulary and so on; however, we in philosophy also speak of behaviourism but when we do it we allude mainly to a rather broad picture of human agency, a picture which would constitute the framework for all kind of legitimate explanations concerning the non-physical aspects of human life. But then it turns out that 'behaviourism' has two different meanings: it may mean either psychological behaviourism or philosophical behaviourism. Now these two kinds of behaviourism may or may not coincide and it is debatable whether they do. For instance, it is sometimes amazingly easy for a philosophical behaviourist to come to an agreement on different issues with psychologists of rival schools and what on several occasions I've been told by non-behaviourist psychologists is simply that the behaviourism they reject is not identical with the philosophical behaviourism I advocate. This plain fact seems to show that what is not sufficiently clear is behaviourism itself, its very nature. So one of my tasks here will be not so much to enumerate and consider in detail the long list of accusations, justified or not, raised against behaviourism, as to try to clear up this particular source of misunderstanding. This will enable us to see more clearly as to what behaviourism as a whole can and cannot achieve.

3. A second point we should be clear about concerns the very notion of behaviour. What I have to say under this heading is rather obvious, so I'll state it as nothing but a helpful reminder of certain platitudes. The idea is simply that psychological behaviourism is the study of human behaviour only in so far as 'behaviour' is understood as a set of purely organic and mechanical movements. This implies that empirical behaviourism leaves out of its field of research precisely what transforms physical movements into real, human or, if you prefer, intentional behaviour. The most exhaustive description of the connections which systematically hold between sets of stimuli and responses, however complex they may be, does not give us a single drop of intentionality. Therefore what lies beyond the reach of behaviourism is the *meaning* of what just by courtesy is called 'behaviour', since the latter includes only, so to speak, dead movements. What is needed in order to pass from purely organic movements to meaningful

behaviour is something which I shall consider later on. However, one important point I have to state here is that what is called 'mind' has to do with behaviour in a different sense from the merely organic or mechanical sense of the word. From this it would follow that there is a sense in which behaviourism, that is, what I called 'psychological' or 'empirical behaviourism', is not and cannot be extensionally equivalent to the study of the human mind.

4. It would be senseless to deny that psychological behaviourism is a scientific theory which deals mainly with living organisms, some more complex than others. However sophisticated it might become, its subject-matter must always be things like reflexes, reactions, movements and so on. Its goal is to develop a kind of empirical study which will give us systematic accounts of correlations which hold between a particular being's reactions and the set of stimuli it gets from its environment. But now two points should be emphasized: first, these correlations are important because they are supposed to be law-like correlations and therefore because to know them is to possess effective means to control overt behaviour; secondly, the environment may be either natural or a wholly artificial one. An advantage of behaviourism over alternative schools in psychology immediately shows up: the behaviourist can reconstruct in the lab a particular setting, the normal situation in which the living organism develops and interacts with others, and study it in those privileged circumstances. In order to do that, the behaviourist's research techniques must lead to results which are, in some way or another, measurable, quantifiable, mechanical and, of course, objective and public. Here we have, therefore, a real empirical science, a discipline which satisfies the conditions of any normal empirical studies: its concepts are so defined that they turn out to be logically tied to observations, certain branches of mathematics may be quite useful (say, statistics), the whole theoretical structure may be organized in a quasi-deductive system and so on. So there is no doubt about its empirical character. But one point remains obscure, namely, the connection between the behaviourist's data and our normal psychological concepts. Now before I state what in my opinion we can expect from behaviourism in connection with this issue, I have to say a couple of words about the nature of psychological concepts and, by implication, about psychology itself.

5. The position I'd like to articulate is rather simple and accordingly I shall be brief. My point is that there could not be psychology at all without physics. What I mean is that the application of psychological concepts *presupposes* the normal employment of physical concepts, notions like body, space, volume, speed, etc. Naturally I do not mean to imply that psychology is *reducible* to

physics or, what amounts to the same thing, that psychological concepts can be explained away in terms of physical ones. What I mean is simply that the psychological dimension of life is engraved in the physical one. In order for something to have beliefs, expectations, thoughts and so on, that something must have a body, act in such a such ways, react in such and such a form, etc. But that does not imply that the knowledge of the physical movements in which the psychological "incarnates" is equivalent to the knowledge of psychological states themselves. Therefore the control of behaviour is not identical with the control of psychological life. The control of behaviour in the psychological sense is nothing but the control of that which psychological life requires in order to materialize. Now it should be clear that, if what I've been saying is true, psychological behaviourism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the explanation of human psychology. As I said, what is missing here is the "intentional" character of human behaviour. In accordance with the behaviouristic spirit, I deny that this important element is given by "the mental", in the philosophically usually absurd sense of the word. The peculiar features of human behaviour arise from its being located within institutions, from human interaction. Broadly speaking, real psychological explanations are essentially unlike biological ones, that is, they are never of a human being considered in isolation, but of the individual in particular social settings or contexts. Naturally, this applies to behaviourism as well. Thus, if what we are trying to provide are psychological explanations, then bodies *and* human conventions and institutions have to be taken into account. Only then can behaviouristic explanations work. What happens is that in general, they are simply taken for granted, but the fact that they are not explicitly stated tends to distort the explanations put forward by behaviourists. It is when we locate ourselves within the framework constituted by persons and social contexts that behaviourism becomes a theory impossible to reject and we are now in a position to guess why: we left empirical behaviourism to embrace its broader, philosophical modality. It does not follow, however, that behaviourism, even in this enriched sense of the word, covers the whole of psychological life. In fact, it suffers from one very important shortcoming, which I shall quickly state.

6. The important limitation of behaviourism we can point to is associated to some of Wittgenstein's most notorious results. I refer to his views about a certain structural, necessary a posteriori, asymmetry between psychological predicates used in the third and in the first persons. It has been a disgrace for human thought that so many philosophers opted for just ignoring this "result". Its importance can hardly be put into question. The import of Wittgenstein's

outcome is that we use words like, for instance, 'pain' or 'belief' with the same *meaning* but in order to achieve two completely different things, depending upon whether we ascribe pain to someone else or whether we ascribe pain to ourselves. In both cases we speak of pain or of belief, but when we speak of someone else we use it to *describe* his or her behaviour, while when we use it in our own case we give *expression* to our states or dispositions to behave in certain ways. As we know, we ascribe psychological states to others by means of *criteria*, in the technical sense with which Wittgenstein introduced the term in philosophy and, needless to say, we never have recourse to criteria to give expression to our states. Now if this is true, then in spite of its scientific character, half of the explanation of psychological life is beyond the reach of behaviourism. Indeed, behaviourism is essentially unable to give a satisfactory account of self-ascription of psychological states (I believe, I think, etc.). Behaviourism relies totally on observations and that means observations of *others'* behaviours, not of one's behaviour. The trouble here is not with behaviourism itself, but rather with its supporters who, failing to detect this feature of language, think nevertheless that behaviourism can be considered as a complete psychological theory and this, if what I said is right, just cannot be the case.

I have just mentioned the notion of a criterion. This is a decisive concept, for it indicates what is required to transform mechanical behaviour into rational, intentional, meaningful behaviour. On one important point I think behaviourists are right: we don't need "the mental". Human behaviour is what it is *because* it is embedded in institutions, language included. It shaped by habits, moulded by institutions, orientated by language that it becomes human, real behaviour. Human behaviour is first of all contextualized behaviour and is something we all can observe. Thus if something is going to explain other people's behaviour, and therefore their thoughts and beliefs, that something can only be behaviourism, in the required broad sense of the word. Let us try to make this clear by tackling the issue of religious belief.

7. The first thing we have to ask is: what is a belief? If our goal were to specify the *meaning* of certain expressions, it would be clear that there cannot be a single, unified answer to this question, but a twofold one. We should have to give an explanation of, say, 'he believes in God' and a different one for 'I believe in God'. But that is not our preoccupation now. What we need to elucidate is the concept of a belief in general, not the concept of someone's *having* a belief, of someone's believing something. Now in order for us to be able to speak of beliefs, we must first of all see people as agents, as bodily beings who act or behave in certain ways. The concept of belief is useful in the sense that it

helps to explain their behaviour, it makes their behaviour intelligible to us, but in order to explain it all we take into account is their behaviour, in the rich sense already explained. On the other hand, let us not forget that there is a variety of criteria and that they may clash with each other, as for instance when someone *says* that he is a religious man and *behaves* like a gangster. In normal circumstances, however, they tend to coincide. At any rate, for our purposes what is worth remarking is that this notion of belief as something internally tied to behaviour is the only useful one. In particular, we don't need any conception of a belief as something like a "mental state", whatever that means or however it is interpreted. The concept of belief as a mental state or as a brain state is *for our purposes* theoretically useless, that is, if what we want to explain is what people actually *do*. To explain peoples's behaviours we have recourse to their beliefs but their beliefs in turn are explained by more data, that is, by more knowledge of the subjects' behaviours, both linguistic and extra-linguistic. The study of contextualized behaviour is the only way to ascertain whether or not someone has a certain belief. In particular, I think it is obvious that it would be a waste of time to open somebody's skull and to examine his brain or his nervous system in order to find out what his beliefs are. In this sense, behaviourism is simply irreplaceable. This also holds for the expressions of belief. Once again, behaviour (in this case, mine) is relevant and even decisive, even if when I say, e.g., that I believe something I am not giving an account of my belief in terms of my behaviour; I don't mean to describe it. What I do is to express a certain attitude, a certain state, a disposition to behave in a way which is coherent with the content of my belief. But the belief has to pass through the prism of my behaviour, for it can only materialize, so to speak, in an unspecifiable wide range of actions and contexts. But, once again, when I say that I believe something I don't enumerate them or name any of them in particular. I simply express them. And, naturally, others know what I believe because they have criteria.

Summarizing: the concept of a belief in general is useful because we have criteria to apply it and those criteria in the end narrow down to meaningful, contextualized behaviour, both linguistic and extra-linguistic. However, this is just a preliminary account, since it applies to all kind of belief. What we want, however, is an explanation not of belief in general, but of religious belief. But if I am not mistaken, that amounts to asking: what does the specificity of religious behaviour consist in?

8. To answer this question we must proceed step by step and the first thing that should be emphasized is the extra-linguistic practicality of religion. Here

we can see the importance of the context, for human actions change their meaning depending upon what context they are embedded in, even if the physical movements are identical. For instance, it is logically possible that someone who knows nothing of, say, chemistry or anatomy goes into a laboratory and playing with different products or bodies does something which scientists (not knowing that the fellow in question has never been trained in science) would call an 'extraordinary experiment'; however, we know that he would not have been doing science at all, even if by chance his results are such that they represent an advance in a particular scientific discipline. Now the same happens with religion. For example, we couldn't possibly say of someone equipped with a natural language except for his lacking all religious vocabulary that he leads a religious life, even if he behaves in a way which coincides with, say, a monk's behavior. This is so because religious behaviour is conceptualized behaviour and so a line of behaviour may be called 'religious' only in so far as the subject himself sees his own practice in this way, that is, *as* religious. This can be put as follows: there can't be religious beliefs without religious practices, religious practices without religious notions and religious notions without religious language. Thus the clue to the explanation of religious life lies in the right understanding of religious language. Once having clarity about the peculiarities of religious language we can deal with religious behaviour. Now what can be said about religious language?

9. In order to avoid excessive exegesis and reconstruction, I'll dogmatically follow Wittgenstein about the main features of religious language and belief. According to him, the characteristic feature of religious language is the use of an image, a simile, a symbol. For instance, we can see in a young man, tortured and crucified, an historical case, but we can also see it as the symbol of human redemption, someone who suffered for all of us. On the other hand religious beliefs are neither rational nor irrational. They are rather a-rational. They are not arrived at after a period of deliberation. They are also unshakeable: once someone adopts them, it is implausible that he'll try to get rid of them. Now what does it mean for something to be a religious symbol? What is its point? The ultimate explanation can only lie in its practical utility. A religious symbol serves to colour and guide the individual's life. Thus broadly speaking, a religious symbol has a twofold function:

- a) it enables us to express certain things
- b) it leads our behaviour in a certain way



I won't go much further into the question of the meaning of religious expressions, since what I would like to consider here is rather religious behaviour. In this connection, the first thing to be said is that it would be a great mistake to identify religious behaviour with the taking part in certain rites or ceremonies. Roughly, *religious behaviour is simply behaviour interpreted and guided by a particular image, an image which gives coherence and meaning to the totality of my actions, which organizes them.* If I act taking into account what biology, chemistry, history, business, etc., tell us, I do not behave in a religious way. If I take decisions depending on calculations, goals, etc., I do not behave in a religious way. But if I act and react having in mind a picture, for instance, if I imagine that I am being watched and judged and act accordingly, then I behave in a religious way.

10. We are in a position now to ask: what does religious behaviour look like? What is it to behave in a religious way? We said that religious language is characterized by the use of an image. Now what is the function of this image? The image represents an ideal, that is, something which in fact is unattainable. So religious behaviour is a continuous behavioural exercise which gets us each time nearer to this ideal. In this sense, religious behaviour is a way of approaching perfection through action. Now since the ideal in question, embodied in an image, has to do with the totality of our experiences and actions, that is, with our life as a whole and not with parts of it, what the religious image generates is a certain attitude, a tendency to act in certain ways with respect to people, animals and things, that is, with respect to the world. The universality of the religious image is associated first of all to a general *attitude* in life. Religious behaviour is a "know how" rather than a "know what".

Can we say something about this religious attitude we speak about? Probably no more than a few things. It is, first and foremost, an attitude of *acceptance* of the world of facts. This acceptance should not be confused with weakness. It is simply false that a religious man is a weak man. Neither is religious behaviour identifiable with passivity or inaction. Religious behaviour is rather the behaviour of someone convinced, of someone who has no doubts, of someone who found his path in life and which, therefore, knows how to act, what to do. The religious man is the man who does what he *ought do*, at least in the well known Kantian sense in which the source of what we ought to do is not what is beneficial to us. So religious behaviour is essentially anti-utilitarian behaviour. Nevertheless, that does not mean that the religious person is someone who *has* to renounce, to pleasure, to power, etc. Rather a religious person is someone who, little by little, comes to feel disdain for the pleasures of life, someone who

may be happy in spite of lacking them. As Wittgenstein put it, "The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of the world.

To it the amenities of the world are so many graces of fate".<sup>2</sup>

So much for religious behaviour.

11. Perhaps we would like to ask now what does religious behaviour show of a religious human being, that is, what kind of experience has someone who behaves in a religious way? I don't even dream to give an exhaustive list of all the elements involved in religious life, but surely we can include the following:

a) a certain feeling of admiration, of awe.

b) an intense distress or affliction

c) the need to be helped and the awareness that no human help is available

d) a peculiar kind of vision of the totality of things and experiences

e) the pleasure of locating ourselves with respect to the world as a whole and of defining our position toward it.

It is when someone finds himself in a state whose elements are at least some of the just mentioned feelings that the subject wants to speak of God. The important point here seems to me to be the following one: religious life doesn't consist of special experiences, in the sense of being in front of a something, of seeing something special, a giant for instance. Rather, religious life appears when the subject wants to *say* something which can't be expressed in the language of facts. But what subject are we speaking about? The subject we are interested in is the person considered as a linguistic being and therefore as a social one. Religious needs first appear when users of language discover that they might wish to say things which their factual language doesn't permit them to say.

12. I have tried to show, concentrating in the particular case of religious thought, that behaviourism can provide quite useful explanations. Let us then ask: why is it that behaviourism arouses such an intense antagonism? Is there anything intrinsically wrong with it? I don't think so. It seems to me that what is wrong is not behaviourism itself, but the kind of use people want to make of it, the interpretations they put upon it. The error comes mainly from not recognizing the limits of behaviouristic explanations, from seeing behaviourism as a self-contained theory which requires nothing external to it in order to function. As I see it, behaviourism does work, that is, it provides genuine explanatory descriptions, real explanations, but only in so far as we locate them within the wider framework constituted by sets of principles and descriptions within which

2. I. Wittgenstein. *Notebooks 1914-1916*. Basil Blackwell. Oxford (1979), p. 81.

actions and place. The principles and descriptions state connections and conventions thanks to which actions become meaningful, fully human and what we must be aware of is the fact that behaviourism by itself is wholly unable to reconstruct institutions, language, conventions and so on. In this sense, psychological behaviourism stands in need of something else, that is, philosophical behaviourism. Seen in this light and keeping in mind its essential limitation concerning the first person avowals of psychological states, to deny behaviourism any theoretical value would be like denying the reality of the sun at noon, on a beautiful summer day.