

Logical behaviourism

THE THEORY

Behaviourism began as a theory of how psychology should conduct itself to achieve the status of a science. Science can only investigate what is publicly accessible. Hence psychology can and must aim only at the explanation and prediction of behaviour, as any talk of or appeal to ‘inner’, and so inaccessible, states cannot be scientific. There is no scientific way to establish their existence or nature. It is no objection to say: ‘but we can ask people what they feel/want/believe’. Behaviourism applies to and includes speech behaviour. What people say does not give us ‘direct access’ to their inner states; it is just another form of behaviour.

In some ways, this is unexciting. Behaviourism becomes more controversial when it makes either of two further claims:

1. that behaviour can be described and explained without reference to mental events – instead, we can explain behaviour in terms of stimuli, learning history, and reinforcement (all external and observable); or
2. that talk about the mind and mental states is, or should be, talk about behaviour.

This last claim is the theory of ‘logical behaviourism’. It recommends that when we try to describe and explain behaviour, concepts that refer to ‘inner’ mental states should (and can) either be paraphrased into concepts that refer only to behaviour and external events or be eliminated.

In its simplest, and very implausible, form, logical behaviourism equates a mental state, e.g. pain, to actual behaviour: so to be in pain is to do certain things, such as wince, recoil from the cause of pain, nurse the damaged part of the body, etc. But someone stoical might not show their pain; while an actor might pretend to be in pain. So this can’t be right. The more sophisticated version claims that talk of pain is just talk of the disposition to behave in these ways, which the stoic has, but the actor does not. When talking of dispositions, we are talking of what the person might do in particular situations.

THE APPEAL OF LOGICAL BEHAVIOURISM

Logical behaviourism has a number of advantages. For example, it doesn’t face the problem of mental causation. If substance dualism were correct, there is a very perplexing problem about how two things as different as mind and body can causally interact. Behaviourism claims that mental states don’t cause behaviour, so there is no problem of how they cause behaviour. It claims either that behaviour can be explained without reference to mental states or that talk of mental states is just talk of behaviour.

It also avoids the problem of other minds. Talking about mental states is just talking about dispositions to behave in certain ways. From how someone behaves, we can infer what behavioural dispositions they have. But from this, we don’t then infer that they have a mind. The link between behaviour and minds isn’t evidential, it is logical. To say

they have certain dispositions just is to say they have certain mental states. We can know that other people have minds, because we can know directly that they behave in particular ways.

OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Two objections to behaviourism take issue with how it takes into account our experience of our own minds. The first claims that we can tell from introspection what mental states – beliefs, desires and so on – we have. This would seem odd if mental states were just dispositions to behaviour. I don't have to infer from how I behave, or how I think I am disposed to behave, what mental states I have. They have some 'inner' aspect as well that reveals their content to us directly.

The second objection presses the point: many mental states have an inner aspect which can't be captured by behaviour at all. Pain isn't just a disposition to shout or wince; there is also how pain feels, 'what it is like' to experience pain. Or again, couldn't it be that you and I have identical dispositions to behaviour, but 'from the inside' there is something different? Imagine that when I look at grass, I experience the colour that you experience when you look at ripe tomatoes. But we both use the word 'green' for describing grass and red for describing tomatoes.

Behaviourists have countered these objections by again pointing to what our language about the mind means. Take the last example: can we coherently suppose and describe the idea that I see 'red' when looking at something green? I don't have any other way of describing what I see when I see something we call 'green' except 'green'! I can't 'check' whether what occurs in your consciousness is just what occurs in my consciousness when we look at the same colour. But this is because it is logically impossible: 'checking your consciousness' here doesn't make sense. So there to try to 'compare' what we see 'in our minds' is literally nonsense.

A similar answer can be given to the first objection. It might be that we can now identify our mental states (=behavioural dispositions) immediately. But how did we learn to identify and then describe these states (a desire for chocolate, a belief that dogs have four legs)? It must have been from other people, and that means that there must have been a way to correlate something public, available to others – i.e. behaviour – with these states in the first place. So all talk about mental states can only be meaningful if it is tied to behaviour.

A third objection is that we cannot reduce talk of mental states to talk of behaviour. Doing exactly the same thing could, in different instances, be expressions of completely different mental states – I might run towards something because I'm scared of it, and want to surprise it; or I might run towards it because I'm not scared of it. The stoic might be in pain, but not show it – thereby expressing the disposition not to show pain. How can we tell which dispositions someone has and is expressing without referring to other mental states? When we try to spell out those states as dispositions to behave, we find the same problem again. But if we always have refer to other mental states, we haven't reduced mental states to dispositions to behave.

The behaviourist can respond that we are taking 'behaviour' much too narrowly. You can tell – from facial expression, for instance – whether someone is running scared or not

scared; or from what happens next; or from just how they go about it. Behaviour is expressive, not just 'mere behaviour'.

But this reply is not legitimate: expressive descriptions of behaviour use the very mental terms (angrily, in fear, etc.) that behaviourism says should be replaced. So we still can't replace talk of mental states by talk of behaviour.