

## Unacknowledged Behaviorist: An Appreciation of William Stephenson's "Postulates of Behaviorism"

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*It is from this standpoint that we regard behaviorism, properly understood, to mean the study of behavior from any scientific vantage-point . . . (Stephenson, 1953a, p. 116).*

Numerologists might make much of the year 1953, given its significance for naturalistic psychology. That year, the behavior analyst B. F. Skinner published *Science and Human Behavior*, the interbehaviorist J. R. Kantor published *The Logic of Modern Science*, and the Q methodologist William Stephenson published *The Study of Behavior* and "Postulates of Behaviorism." Stephenson's article is the focus of this appreciation because it reveals a behavioral perspective on psychology, even though Stephenson is not usually regarded as a behaviorist. To explain, I consider his treatment of three behaviorally significant topics: dualism, monism, and research methods. I begin with dualism.

### Dualism

In 1948, the behaviorist Kenneth Spence published "The Postulates and Methods of 'Behaviorism.'" Five years later, Stephenson (1953a) responded with "Postulates of Behaviorism," basing his commentary on Spence's "first principle . . . that the concern of behaviorism is to 'bring order and meaning into the realm of certain events provided by immediate experience'" (p. 112; see Spence, 1948, p. 69). Spence's principle implies certain troublesome assumptions, which Lichtenstein (1959) explains by referring to the causal theory of perception and the doctrine of specific nerve energies:

According to the causal theory of perception a continuous chain of causation, starting with the external object, leads to the sense organ of the percipient, thence over the sensory nerve to the appropriate sensory area in the cortex. Up to this point everything in the chain is either physical or physiological. But at this point, and prior to the passage of the impulse into the efferent nerve fiber, there occurs a nonphysical sensation. Thus an immaterial factor is introduced or superimposed upon a closed physical system.

The doctrine of specific nerve energies holds in essence that we are not aware of external objects but rather of the conditions of our

sensory nerve endings....Sensory qualities are not regarded as actual object qualities but only as signs of them in the mind. (p. 40)

Skinner (1964) identified these assumptions as the “copy theory” of perception (pp. 86-90; see also Kantor, 1963, pp. 355-356, 1969, pp. 264-275). In the context of investigation, the assumptions mean that scientists study, not behavior directly, but their own sensory qualities, copies, representations, or immediate experiences (Lichtenstein, 1959; see Delprato, 2006, pp. 151-152; Morris, 2003, p. 279). Perhaps because of these assumptions, Stephenson (1953a) regarded Spence’s (1948) principle as faulty: “Even if by a hair’s breadth this [i.e., experience] implies something categorically different from *behavior*, then, it seems to us, the essential meaning of behaviorism has been missed” (p. 110). The essential meaning had been missed because Spence’s principle, with its reliance on experience, ultimately implies dualism (Lichtenstein, 1959).

Dualism is the position “that the human being comprises . . . two qualitatively different, independent entities” (Reuder, 1994, p. 424), these being “the nonmaterial mind and the material body” (Reuder, 1994, p. 425). Behaviorists such as Skinner (1977) and Kantor (1963) rejected this as unscientific. Stephenson (1953a) also rejected dualism, as seen in his reference to “the mentalistic fictions of psychologists” (p. 113), his remark “that experience and mind in any existential sense, is [sic] a fiction” (p. 113), and his comment that “From the systematic standpoint Watson marks the beginning of scientific psychology . . . because of his sudden grasp of the irrelevancy for psychology of the age-long existential and functional mentalisms” (p. 112). Moreover, Stephenson (1953a) observed that the dualistic “identification of ‘inner’ with mind, and mind with unreliability, has led to the rejection of subjectivity as worthy of our scientific endeavors” (p. 115). He added, “It [i.e., subjectivity] is, instead, likely to be the central issue in all psychology.” (Stephenson, 1953a, p. 115)

### Monism

Stephenson’s rejection of dualism might seem inconsistent with an interest in subjectivity. It is not, and it brings us to another way in which Stephenson was a behaviorist: Instead of advocating dualism, he advocated monism. As he argued in *The Study of Behavior*, “Logic . . . leads us to regard behavior as neither mind nor body nor physiology: it is simply behavior, whether subjective to a person or objective to others” (Stephenson, 1953b, p. 23). Thus, in contrast to studying the investigator’s experience, “We have *behavior* to study; that is all” (Stephenson, 1953a, p. 113). And in contrast to studying the research participant’s mentalistic “covert activities” (Stephenson, 1953a, p. 114), “what is essential is the acceptance of the ‘inner’ frame only in the behavioristic sense of a person’s self-reflections, his self-conceptions, his self-observations, unreflective or otherwise, as worthy of true empirical study” (p. 115). This is Stephenson’s behavioral monism.<sup>1</sup>

### Research Methods

As for research methods, "Postulates of Behaviorism" is not a primer on Q methodology. Nonetheless, Stephenson (1953a) provided a brief description of his research procedures, further clarifying his behavioral perspective. Q samples and conditions of instruction reveal "the current state of behavior," as seen in Q sorts (Sidman, 1960, pp. 120-122; see Midgley, 2006; Midgley & Morris, 2002). Stephenson discussed his procedures in the context of several "representative probings" (adapted from Stephenson, 1953a, p. 117):

- |                  |       |   |
|------------------|-------|---|
| (a) "Inner"      | (i)   | Psychicism of X                                     |
|                  | (ii)  | Self-Reflection of X                                |
|                  | (iii) | Reconstruction of (ii) by Y                         |
| (b) "Outer"      | (i)   | Observations of X's behavior by Y                   |
|                  | (ii)  | Self-Observation of X's behavior by X               |
| (c) "Historical" | (i)   | By way of X's Self-Reflections or Self-Observations |
|                  | (ii)  | By way of Y's outer observations of X's behavior    |

Stephenson (1953a) noted that "all the six vantage-points, (a) (ii) to (c) (ii) above, (that is, excluding (a) (i)) are open to the full flush of scientific procedures" (pp. 117-118), thus reiterating his rejection of dualism. He then presented some of the procedure of Q methodology, in a footnote, by describing Q samples and transforming the six acceptable probes into six sets of Q sorts for Freud's case of the client Dora. Stephenson's (1953a) descriptions of three Q-sort sets are provided here as illustrative:

- a (ii): Dora provides self-descriptions ([Q sorts]  $K_1, K_2, \dots$ ) which bear upon the immediate behavior at issue (the dreams) (p. 118).
- b (i): Freud, from his regard of Dora and the conflict and transference situation, could have given Q-sort descriptions ( $F_1, F_2, \dots$ ) of what is at issue (p. 119).
- c (i): Q-sort self-descriptions ( $D_a, D_b, \dots$ ) can be given by Dora about significant events in her history, as brought to light by the psychoanalysis.  $D_a$ , for example, might consist of a self-description of what Dora recollects she was like five years earlier, when an intimacy with Herr K first arose (p. 119).

By using Q sorts, Stephenson also demonstrated how the inner, outer, and historical probes can all be used to study subjectivity. For instance, Freud's descriptions of Dora, b (i), are outer in the sense that they are the investigator's descriptions of *someone else*, but they are also subjective in that they are *the investigator's descriptions* of someone else (see footnote 1).

## Conclusion

The significance of Stephenson's (1953a) "Postulates of Behaviorism," published essentially as chapter 5 in *The Study of Behavior* (1953b), is that it makes a compelling case for Stephenson as a behaviorist. As Kantor (1971a, p. 519, 1971b, pp. 545-546) argued, behaviorism need not be limited to a system of psychology but is simply naturalistic psychology (see Stephenson, 1953b, pp. 22-29). He wrote of his field behaviorism or interbehaviorism that:

It approaches psychological studies from the standpoint of confrontable events in the same way as any natural science does. The field behaviorist becomes interested in the interbehavior of organisms under definite environing conditions and proceeds to investigate them in a manner suitable to the original events and in conformity with the technological means available. He does all this independently of the transcendental postulates [e.g., dualism] which have dominated psychology since the extinction of the naive behaviorism of the Greeks. (Kantor, 1971b, p. 543)

Given his rejection of dualism and acceptance of behavioral monism, in particular, Stephenson was a behaviorist in this sense (see Delprato, 2006; Morris, 2003).

The primary purpose of this appreciation is to lift up one of Stephenson's contributions. My comments, however, are not entirely original (see, e.g., Brown, 1980, pp. 157-159, 321-333, 2006; Delprato & Knapp, 1994; Lichtenstein, 1959, 2006; Smith, 2001a, 2001b, pp. 319-343). This is because the secondary purpose of this appreciation is not originality but something more modest: When "behaviorism is...reduced to a minority opinion" (see Lichtenstein, 2006, p. 271) or viewed as "politically incorrect" (see Morris, 2003, p. 293), this appreciation might simply remind us of the importance of behaviorism to Stephenson and, thus, to Q methodology (e.g., Stephenson, 1983-1984).

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Concerning dualism and behavioral monism, in the conclusion to "Postulates of Behaviorism," Stephenson (1953a) wrote:

Whilst there is no place for experience, phenomenology, "private worlds," and the like, there is plenty for the essential objectives of those psychologists who believe that one's yearnings, wishes, ruminations, reflections, wantings, inclinations, fancies, dreams, remembrances, and a thousand other "inner" forms of behavior are of crucial importance; and we believe that most of these matters can now be brought into testable propositional form. (p. 119; see also p. 112)

In the same article, he also wrote "that internal merely means 'from the personal standpoint,' or 'as I see it,' or 'as I suppose it to be,' or any other of hundreds of such dispositions, and not anything covert in any mentalistic sense" (p. 114). From my point of view, the first quotation above could be read to mean that Q methodology *does* study "covert activities," whereas the second quotation denies this. The apparent contradiction is important to address because it concerns Stephenson's conceptualization of subjectivity. There are at least four solutions. One, emphasize the first quotation. Perhaps Stephenson intended for Q methodology to be restricted to so-called private *behavioral* events, the "'inner' forms of behavior," and conceptualized "yearnings, wishes, ruminations," and so on in this way (cf. Skinner, 1953, pp. 257-282). He appears to have written as much. Two, emphasize the second quotation. Consider, for example, Stephenson's (1986) conditions of instruction for a Q study on rain. Among the conditions are some that appear to have little to do with covert activities and more to do with "the personal standpoint," in particular:

In a heavy downpour, how would you describe it? . . .

There is a practical view to take about rain; what, in your view, would be a practical view about "it is raining"? . . .

Some people see only the bright side of things about rain: how would they describe "it is raining"? (1986, p. 48)

Three, assume for now that there is no contradiction—that yearnings, wishes, ruminations, and so on merely mean from the personal standpoint—although I am too much of an apprentice Q methodologist to appreciate this fully. Four, assume for now that yearnings, wishes, ruminations, and so on, on the

one hand, and the personal standpoint, on the other, are different but that Q methodology studies both.

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