

[Column 3 Set 2] Exploring More Mysteries of Living: Current Efforts Supersede Past Views



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Why these Columns? Because human behavior causes global problems, and solving these problems requires changes in human behavior... So *everyone* benefits from knowing something about the natural science of human behavior that these columns describe. See the 72 columns of the first set, in the *Explaining Mysteries of Living* book or on **BehaviorInfo.com**, for the *basics* of this science.

Consider a little detail on some superseded alternatives from the early days of behaviorology. This can help clarify the current directions of this science. Across the over 100 years of its existence, several types of behaviorism sequentially grappled, with increasing success, with the question of how, effectively, to handle private events.

The “ism” ending on that word, behaviorism, indicates that this is a philosophy, in this case a generic philosophy of science of many iterations of the natural science of behavior. And in this context, “private events” can simply refer to events that can function as stimuli only for the body in which they occur.

When happening, all the intertwined environmental/neural/behavioral processes, that previous columns introduced, can move along at such a rapid pace that they may seem magical or undetermined. This includes the problem of private events, and becomes especially noticeable when we try to encompass behavior in general across a time frame beyond a few moments, because events can quickly outpace our measurement technology.

That problem, however, does not reside with nature, which the philosophy of science of the natural sciences, naturalism, takes as lawful. Rather, that problem resides with our residual ignorance, which we sometimes manage with a variety of techniques including probability and chaos theories.

Meanwhile, those intertwined environmental/neural/behavioral processes, public or private, remain *entirely natural*. The skin presents no special boundary to the laws of the universe operating on both sides of it.

Many researchers have considered the private–event problem by addressing the question

of consciousness, because this topic in particular seems to focus attention on the difference between science and non–science with respect to behavior. While consciousness gets its own group of columns later, it relates to the sequence of types of behaviorism that occurred early on in the history of the natural science of behavior.

That sequence happened due to different attempts to address the status of private events, particularly their reduced access and their reality. Some early behaviorists, like John B. Watson, simply denied the existence of private events. For example, B. F. Skinner reported that Watson “tangled with introspective psychologists by denying the existence of images” (see Skinner’s 1963 paper in *Science*, “Behaviorism at Fifty”).

Other early behaviorists accepted the public/private distinction but disallowed the inclusion of private events in scientific deliberations as a methodological matter. They insisted that science is public and so must exclude private events.

Still others, while also accepting the public/private distinction, allowed such events in scientific discourse. But they allowed these events only after operationally defining out the private aspect.

As examples, some simply denied that hunger exists. Others, accepted that hunger was private, but disallowed its study due to its privateness. Still others, while also accepting that hunger was private, studied it only after defining away its privateness by defining it as the number of hours of food deprivation.

Respectively, we allude to those three approaches to the privacy problem as John Watson’s *original* radical behaviorism, methodological behaviorism, and operational behaviorism. All prove unsatisfactory, because they sidestep the reality of private events, and thereby fail to deal with those events effectively.

Skinner referred to the assumptions present in his 1963 article as a “restatement of radical behaviorism.” This contributed to people using the label, *radical behaviorism*, for the philosophy of science that contained those assumptions.

That philosophy became the current *philosophy of science* of behaviorology and its contingency–engineering applications and interventions, for example, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). It resolved the privacy problem by emphasizing that the skin is a scientifically unimportant boundary.

The physical dimensions of public and private events are the same on either side of the skin. A natural science of behavior makes no assumptions that events inside the skin are of any special nature, or that we need to know them in any special way, different from the rest of nature.

Instead, an appropriate and adequate natural science of behavior deals with private events, including consciousness, as part of behavior itself. In the last six decades, experimental–science results readily accumulated that support this privacy–problem solution. For example, see the Hefferline study, from 1956 in *Science*. A discussion appeared in column 46 of the first column set.

Once trained in this science, people had little difficulty with the label, “radical behaviorism.” Over those same decades, however, the radical–behaviorism label caused

ongoing educational difficulties for students and clients in the discipline, and others outside the discipline.

That happened due to culturally informed, traditional misunderstandings regarding both words, “behaviorism,” and “radical.” For example, students and others often misunderstand this use of “radical” as “extreme,” and the culture conditions many to experience a negative emotional reaction to it.

As a result, more recently, some people in this science have instead begun using the label, “behavioral naturalism.” This more understandable label even makes the connection with the *naturalism* of the natural sciences.

Turning from history to the future, the next few columns begin our coverage of initial scientific answers to some of humanity’s ancient but as yet inadequately answered questions. An interrelated sequence of topics becomes our first focus.

That topic sequence includes values, rights, ethics, and morals, starting with values and their direct connection with reinforcers. This topic appeared several times in the 72 columns of the first column set, and received some summary attention in column 67 of that set.

The fourth extra paper, in Part II of the *Explaining Mysteries of Living* book, provides more information on “behavioral naturalism.” The BOOKS page at www.behaviorology.org contains a full description of this book.

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