



WHAT IS PRIVATE BEHAVIOR?

# UNDERSTANDING INNER EVENTS



# COMMENTS ON SKINNER'S NOTE ON FEELINGS AS CAUSES



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*Throughout his life, Skinner wrote many notes that never appeared in any of his publications. These notes give an insight into his thinking and personal life. They provide not only a portrait of the quintessential American scientist, but also the development of the science he began and the humane practices that derived from that science during his lifetime. In his notes, Skinner comments on his own behavior, on the activities of others, about social practices, about his family and colleagues, about ethics, music, arts, and many other topics. Skinner had the training and ambitions of a novelist, and his notes talk about his thoughts when working out what he had to say. Few scientists have documented their personal reflections and daily thoughts as thoroughly as B. F. Skinner. Even fewer scientists stand out as both a scientist and a social commentator. Scientists' notes with details written at the time of conversations and thought processes are rare.*

*Many of Skinner's unpublished notes are in the Skinner collection at the Harvard University Pusey Library. Other unpublished notes exist only in the B. F. Skinner Foundation archives or in the family's collections. In 1980, a small selection of Skinner's notes was published as a book titled Notebooks, now out of print.*

*As a follow-up to his essay in this issue, Operants asked Dr. T. V. Joe Layng to comment on one of the notes from Skinner's Notebooks.*

Reading Skinner requires effort. It is not effortful because his sentences are particularly complex or there is a use of unfamiliar terms, but because to understand Skinner is to not simply understand what he says, but to understand, in the words of the late Joseph Schwab, what he is trying to do. In his essay on *Enquiry and the Reading Process*, Schwab described how it is often possible to go beyond what the words being used are saying to discover a larger effect on the reader. He asks, why did the author choose the words they did? Is there a larger lesson to be learned? In reading Skinner, this is almost always the case, and makes it an activity of enquiry not mere comprehension. In fact, my approach to private experience (truth be told I am not sure this experience qualifies as an "event") was greatly influenced by employing Schwab's approach while studying Skinner's *Behaviorism at Fifty* nearly 50 years ago. In that essay, Skinner described private experience as being part of behavior. It immediately struck me that he did not say private experience is behavior. If he had been writing about a lever press, I am fairly certain he would have said lever pressing is behavior. What was he trying to do by writing it the way he did? After reading the article many times and looking at the construction, I came to the conclusion that what he was saying was that private experience is not a separate behavior as is the case with a lever press, but is a part of ongoing behavior that is only accessible to the behaving individual.

Now it could be argued that Skinner didn't really mean that; his word choice was just a happenstance. Years later, I discovered evidence that my conclusion was likely indeed correct. I saw the video of his delivery of the paper *Behaviorism at Fifty*, which was later published in the book *Behaviorism and Phenomenology: Contrasting Bases for Modern Psychology*, and in *Science* magazine. In the video, Skinner says private experience is behavior. When it came time to publish, it was changed to *part of behavior*. To me, this indicated that Skinner was trying to do something much more interesting and compelling than claiming private experience was behavior. He was laying out a framework for exploring private experience that went beyond merely assuming it is unobservable. Private behavior, instead, was part of observable behavior, not a separate thing. Over the years, along with the insights of Israel Goldiamond, Paul Andronis, and others, we have begun to treat private experience as not simply part of behavior but as part of the contingencies of which the behavior is a function. As a result, we have been able to develop new approaches to clinical intervention, some of which is reflected in my article in this issue, and to teaching complex repertoires, such as reading comprehension.

This passage from Notebooks illustrates the same theme as first described in *Behaviorism at Fifty* as it applies to feelings. Not surpris-



ingly, it is also consistent with my article on emotions appearing in this issue of *Operants*. It is also illustrates what Skinner is not only saying but trying to do.

### Feelings as Causes

In *About Behaviorism* I say that the states of the body which are felt are not the causes of behavior but the collateral products of the causes. This does not mean that private events cannot control behavior—as they do when we describe them (even if necessarily inaccurately). I meant the causal role traditionally assigned to felt states in such expressions as “I struck because I was angry” or “I went because I felt like going.” The point of my statements in *About Behaviorism* was that there was no initiating action inside.

Private events are limited not only in the extent to which they control “introspective” accounts but also in the extent to which they are useful in self-management. The injunction “when angry count to ten” can be followed only if there is some evidence of “being angry.” The evidence may be introspective, as when one feels activity in the autonomic nervous system or an “inclination to strike,” or exteroceptive, as when one observes either an occasion upon which one commonly strikes or behavior associated with striking, both of which may be seen by others.

Notebooks, page 227-228

Entry dated: 11/27/1974

What is Skinner trying to do? Let's take a closer look.

“In *About Behaviorism* I say that the states of the body which are felt are not the causes of behavior but the collateral products of the causes.” What is Skinner doing? He is trying to get us to understand that what is felt, for the most part, is as much a result of the consequential, and precedential (classical conditioning) contingencies acting on the individual as is observable behavior. Feelings are part of the contingency.

“This does not mean that private events cannot control behavior—as they do when we describe them (even if necessarily inaccurately).” What is Skinner doing? In the context of the first sentence, Skinner is not saying that private events set the occasion for behavior, or act as reinforcers. He is asking us to approach emotions in a new way. He is trying to get us to understand that it is our verbal behavior about feelings that must be investigated, and perhaps understanding emotions is to understand the consequential contingencies that occasion the verbal episode. Our verbal behavior describing feelings is in fact describing contingencies. People respond differently to “I hate that,” and “I love that.” The emotion words immediately communicate

the action of contingencies without actually describing them.

“I meant the causal role traditionally assigned to felt states in such expressions as ‘I struck because I was angry’ or ‘I went because I felt like going.’ The point of my statements in *About Behaviorism* was that there was no initiating action inside.” What is Skinner doing? He is providing a different framework for understanding feelings. There is no internal stimulus whose presence or absence occasions our behavior, but that doesn't mean there is nothing felt.

“Private events are limited not only in the extent to which they control ‘introspective’ accounts but also in the extent to which they are useful in self-management.” What is Skinner doing? He is urging us to never forget that private experience can never be accurately described, our discrimination training is necessarily limited, accordingly, basing action on them is of limited utility.

“The injunction ‘when angry count to ten’ can be followed only if there is some evidence of ‘being angry.’ The evidence may be introspective, as when one feels activity in the autonomic nervous system or an ‘inclination to strike,’ or exteroceptive, as when one observes either an occasion upon which one commonly strikes or behavior associated with striking, both of which may be seen by others.” What is Skinner doing? He is proposing that we look elsewhere than some internal initiating event; instead of looking to anger, we look for the conditions where creating distance from an event by driving the event away is a reinforcer. Under some circumstances, behavior may occur that redirects the distancing as a result of other consequences that are also likely to occur.

In summary, Skinner provides a framework that allows us to give up the notion that the private experience we call feeling is causally related to behavior. Instead it is a by-product of, or as I prefer, a descriptor of (at times) gross physiological change and specific (primarily) consequential contingencies. Where methodological behaviorism leaves us using observable indices of private experience, such as questionnaire responses, Skinner's approach allows us a much fuller treatment of private experience as promised by a radical behaviorism.

Understanding private experience resides not inside a person, even if some gross physiological changes do, but in environmental contingencies, provides a uniquely radical behaviorist approach to understanding feelings. We can study private experience in its own right without assigning it functions reserved for observed relations. We can indeed change feelings, not by acting on them directly, but by changing the contingencies of which they are a function. I believe this is what Skinner was trying to make us understand we could do. ●