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Searching in Ruins for Truth: The Life and Works of John B. Watson— A Review of *Modern Perspectives on John B. Watson and Classical Behaviorism*

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Not many who have seen the great movie, *Amadeus,* will forget its final scene in which Mozart's body is tipped from a rickety carriage into a pauper's grave. And they will remember the rattle of the wheels as the carriage makes its way, in rain and mud, to its destination. The scene is a poignant representation of the ways each age in history has treated some of its geniuses. The century that is about to end saw this done to John Broadus Watson (1878–1958) who was born into dire poverty in a small town in South Carolina, and who rose twice to great heights in two different professions, only to be assailed each time: first by the intrigues of jealousy and of unwholesome academic politics, and second by fate, when Rosalie, his second wife, whom he truly and deeply loved, died. After this, Watson's remaining years became, by all evidence, years of marking time, waiting—waiting, it would seem, for the end. It was in those years that Watson withdrew to his small farm in Connecticut, drank a goodly amount, put on excessive weight, and, in short, let himself go.

The true and full story of this great thinker's life has not been told. What has been told in the two biographies that exist (Buckley, 1989; Cohen, 1979) is incomplete, biased, and exaggerated in aspects that show Watson in the most unfavorable light possible. Character assassination is, perhaps, the second or third oldest profession; the reader who cares about the music of Mozart may remember, too, the aria Dr. Bartolo sings in Rossini's opera, "The Barber of Seville," in praise of slander and gossip. That was penetrating social commentary at the time, and it applies equally now (just observe political campaigns), satirizing as it does the use of defamation as a device to advance one's way in life. That is how Watson's life and his scholarly work were denigrated, beginning in his lifetime and continuing to the present.

The misinformation about the life and works of Watson is now so widespread and so firmly established that bringing the facts to light may well have become impossible. As an aside, it is worth noting that how Watson was defamed merits special study as a curious social phenomenon. Unlike many in history, the defamation took on a life of its own, growing and embellished by those who, with few exceptions, have no discernible gain from what they do.

Against this background, the book edited by Todd and Morris brings some welcome fresh air into the subject. It is, as are many edited books, an unbalanced and frustrating mixture of chapters, some of a high quality and some, sadly, not. Fortunately, however, the good outweigh the bad, and this work should set us on the path to understanding not only the fundamental humanity of Watson's life and the astonishing breadth of his work but

Todd, J. T., & Morris, E. K. (Eds.). (1994). *Modern perspectives on John B. Watson and classical behaviorism.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

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also the real foundations of his behaviorism. I believe it is safe to assume that most readers of this journal have devoted their careers to the pursuit of behavioral studies. It is surely fitting then that they, who are persuaded by behaviorism, should more than anyone else give weight to understanding the foundations on which their life's work rests.

It is commonplace to say that behaviorism has its origin in Watson's behaviorist manifesto—more correctly, his paper entitled "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It"—that was published in the *Psychological Review* in 1913. Despite the concerted efforts of the old guard and despite the departure of its founder from academic life, the subsequent remarkable rise of behaviorism is known but needs briefly to be revisited here.

In the United States especially and the English-speaking world generally, the rise of behaviorism can be traced through not one but several separate lines. Three of these, essentially different from each other, have been particularly significant. One was, of course, the influence of Watson's own work. He brought out the distinct identity of behaviorism, whereas behaviorism had been a tacit but unmistakable feature of the other lines developing at about the same time. The second was the rise of the age of grand theories of learning. That significant phase in psychology began with, and it may be said, was inaugurated by Edward L. Thorndike's theory of learning. Thorndike's *Animal Intelligence* was published in 1898; thereafter, in the first half of this century, research and theoretical debate arising from the theories of learning dominated psychology. Even now, their legacy in contemporary psychology is discernible in every aspect of the discipline. In the present context, it is helpful to note that Watson, the student of Angell and a product of the Chicago school of functionalism, came to psychology by a route different from that of those who developed learning theories. He was never a learning theorist. The learning theorists, however, were behaviorists by, so to speak, the inescapable characteristic of the research that gave rise to their theories; that is, they experimented on behavior. When behaviorism emerged from Watson's writings as a distinct "school" of psychology, the learning theories simply and naturally, without any declaration or other flourish, came to be what they were: behaviorist theories.

It is generally overlooked that at about the time Watson began to write in psychology, Pavlov, too, had developed a behaviorist theory of learning. His was primarily a physiological learning theory, sometimes regarded as a personality theory, and as might be expected from a distinguished physiologist steeped in the tradition of empirical investigation, it was unequivocally of a behaviorist kind. In the meantime, another major learning theorist and behaviorist, Edwin R. Guthrie, together with S. Smith, had been working on a book, *General Psychology in Terms of Behavior,* published in 1921, just 2 years after Watson's *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist.* The grandest, although the most cumbersome and aesthetically the least pleasing, was Hull's theory of learning. This theory became overwhelmingly influential in psychology, and it firmly established, for some time to come, the behaviorist philosophy of psychology as a given for theories of learning, and more generally, for much of psychology. Tolman's *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men* was published in 1932. His, and also, in this regard, the Gestalt psychologists' were behaviorist theories, although now quite erroneously considered to be cognitive notions. Focused on the development of their empirical theories, none of these great psychologists explicitly pronounced conceptual corollaries to their theories, namely, any *philosophies* for the science of psychology. Nonetheless, their behaviorisms were different from each other in significant respects. Thus, in theories of learning are to be found a variety of

kinds of behaviorism that was never, from its very beginnings, a single, invariant set of dicta.

The distinct philosophy of science explicitly named *behaviorism* was developed by Watson. Moreover, to increase even further the complexity of the matter, Watson, like other great scholars, did not arrive at an invariant, frozen form of behaviorism and stop thinking thereafter. Instead, throughout his working years, including the years after his departure from academic employment, he tinkered with it, revised it, and changed his views about expressing particular aspects of it. These variations seem to trouble some of the authors of this book who find fault with Watson for adjusting his views. This discomfort arises, however, only if one begins with the premise that once a theory is proposed, its proponent should stick with it through thick and thin. But, in fact, the better scholars always see their theories and philosophical assertions as tentative, open to change in the light of new knowledge and further reflection. This was so for Sigmund Freud (a fact that frustrated some of his followers), and it was so for B. F. Skinner (a fact in which, I hope, his followers will rejoice).

The third line converging on behaviorism had its origins in the thoughts of Russell and Wittgenstein, and developed through the writings of Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, and others collectively known as the Oxford group or the linguistic philosophers. These great scholars showed that the so-called mentalistic terms in language cannot possibly be mentalistic, because words and phrases arise only from what is communally observed. Ryle, with his characteristic subtle humor, referred to dualism as the "official theory," and coined the term "ghost in the machine" in refuting this deeply ingrained view of life in western thought. The essence of Ryle's and others' views was that to understand the meaning of words and phrases one must look to how they are used, that is, how they *behave* in language. This brief account is, I have to confess, a blatant oversimplification. Unfortunately, in the bounds of the present review, the matter must be left there. However, the interested reader who reads Ryle's book, *The Concept of Mind* (1949) will be richly rewarded, and perhaps will be astonished at how akin its theses are to the views held by most behaviorists.

To sum, by the time when, in the early 1930s, behaviorism came to be the major intellectual force in the discipline of psychology (for evidence, just see the vehemence of its enemies) there were already a variety of behaviorisms, differing from each other in fundamental ways and creating a complexity of penetrating enlightenment. (For a full discussion of various types of behaviorism and the classification of behaviorisms, see Harzem & Miles, 1978.)

The publisher's blurb for the Todd and Morris book juxtaposes "historical classical behaviorism" and "modern radical behaviorism." This duality theme occurs throughout the book and it is the fundamental premise on which the editors' and most of the book's authors' perspectives of the history of behaviorism apparently rest. It is, however, a mistaken theme that distorts not only what Watson contributed but also the history of the development of behaviorism and its varieties. The belief that there were two behaviorisms—classical and radical—and now there is one—radical—is widespread, and is held, I believe, by most who read this journal. The mistake of using the term *classical* behaviorism as a name for the class of all things other than radical behaviorism is no minor matter. It is quite unnecessarily damaging to the intellectual caliber of radical behaviorism. Surely, neither the influence nor the intellectual standing of radical behaviorism can be advanced by rewriting its history. Evidence is unmistakable that distortions of history have a way of leading to disaster. When history is revised to political ends, the result is social turmoil; when it is revised in connection with a theoretical or philosoph-

ical posture, the result is the alienation of those scholars who hold accuracy supreme and therefore on whose work that posture mostly rests.

In case this is misunderstood: This is a basic issue, not confined to but merely echoed in this book, and it needs to be corrected before it becomes entrenched. I believe Todd and Morris are unlikely to object to this, and if they are, no doubt they will write in refutation. In their introduction they note that "an improved account of behaviorism is necessary" (p. xxiii), and, in their characteristically unassuming manner much appreciated by those who personally know them, they offer the book as a "modest attempt to expand . . . the serious scholarly investigation of behaviorism" (p. xxiii). Thus, on balance, this is a good, valuable beginning, to be read by every radical behaviorist. With that, let us now turn to its merits.

The first chapter of the book is the best. Here, Franz Samelson examines and speculates on the influences that led to the publication of Watson's 1913 article. Particularly pertinent for any student of behaviorism are the questions he raises, some previously asked and repeated here by the author, others posed afresh. Among the former kind, Samelson notes, is one that had been puzzled over by Woodworth, who had written, "'the historian fifty years hence . . . will assign much significance to . . . behaviorism; but I admit that I am puzzled . . . exactly where he will find its significance to lie" (1931, p. 89).[1]

I think there is no puzzle here: The question is like being puzzled at the importance given to, say Newton's discovery of gravity, because everyone already knew that unsupported objects fall; or it is like being puzzled at the celebration of the introduction of pasteurization to surgery, because everyone, at least those who dealt with cooking and preserving food, already knew that boiling postpones fermentation. Newton's genius was in seeing the scientific implications of, and Pasteur's was in seeing the reasons for, these otherwise ordinary phenomena. I already noted the natural and tacit behaviorist characteristic of the theories of learning. Watson's genius was in seeing and explicitly bringing out the scientific significance of concentrating on that which is inevitable in any psychological research, namely the observing and recording of behavior, and thereby eliminating the verbal and conceptual clutter that gets in the way of making good sense of what is observed.

Perhaps the most significant point that strongly bears on this chapter, and the book in general, is this: What is most important is not whether Samelson's, or my, or someone else's answer to Woodworth's puzzle is the correct one; the importance lies in testing many ways of approaching the question and seeing the relations and contradictions among the possible answers and the ensuing implications. This is the real significance of the issues raised by Samelson, more than his answers. And this is the way history, and particularly the history of ideas, can best be understood.

James Todd's chapter provides an invaluable service to future scholars of behaviorism. Quintessential behavior analyst that he is, he has done what behavior analysts excel in above all else: He has systematically and painstakingly analyzed the references to Watson and behaviorism in 130 books in English, published between the years 1920 and 1989. Data are summarized in clear and telling graphs, and there is much to be distilled from them even beyond Todd's excellent discussion. Here is a host of material to be used for years to come by those wishing to study behaviorism. All this, together with the archival information included in the book (an almost complete bibliography of Watson's publications

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[1] I could not find this in my copy of Woodworth's book (7th printing but not a new edition) and give here the reference provided by Samelson.

and a list of archival collections relating to Watson's life) by themselves make the book invaluable to any interested scholar. The brief account of Todd's exchange with Gould and Marler is essential reading for behaviorists, radical or otherwise, because it accurately exemplifies the difficulty of interacting with scientists, no matter how famous (not quite the same as eminent) who are prepared to abandon standards of scholarship, such as reading the original material on which they have written commentary, in pursuit of supporting a position to which they are, apparently, doggedly committed, come what may.

Yet another excellent chapter is by Alexandra Logue. She has carefully outlined the development, over many years, of Watson's research pursuits, his gradual shift to working with human subjects, and some of the changes in his views of behaviorism. Moreover, she gives the reader a rare bonus by providing a glimpse of the position taken by Rosalie Rayner Watson as to behaviorism and, it will not escape the careful reader, into how she and her husband related to each other in their marriage. Rosalie Rayner was, in the best sense of the phrase, a liberated young woman and a graduate of Vassar College, a college with a longstanding tradition of producing independently minded people, not easily persuaded by unexamined ideas (Jane Fonda, Jackie Kennedy, Mary McCarthy, Meryl Streep, and Mary Cover Jones, to name but a few). Fitting into this impressive line, Rosalie, too, was an emancipated, cultured person with impeccable good taste and freedom of thought. Daughter of an influential family (her father was Isidore Rayner, a Senator from Maryland), she defied their concerted pressures to break her relation with Watson and married him just a little more than a week after his divorce was final. In the years to come, she disagreed with her husband, not about behaviorism but about what he thought *followed* from taking behaviorism as the foundation of one's actions. John Watson believed that, in child-rearing, emotions should be suppressed and one's interactions with a child should be confined, as much as possible, to discipline by reason. There is also evidence, however, that try as he might, he was unable strictly to apply this to his own family, largely because Rosalie would not permit it. She loved, as she described them, the drama of life, giggles, and a tear in the eye for poetry. The reader will be delighted by the direct quotation Logue gives, and will be enriched by going one step beyond to the original article by Rosalie Rayner. She was, all the evidence attests, a wonderful, cultured woman of independent thought, sound reason, emotional warmth, and lasting love.

William Baum's chapter, which is commentary on the other chapters, is a disappointment because we have come to expect better from this author. It has many inaccuracies, and one is left with the impression that the author needed several more weeks to revise it. For example, there is the patently inaccurate suggestion that Lashley, Meyer, Dunlap, and Jennings, together with Watson, formed a group at Johns Hopkins, and that the idea of behaviorism arose collectively from them. In fact there was no such group, and Watson had different relations with each of these individuals. For example, Meyer was Watson's superior who granted him research rooms in his laboratory and with whom Watson persistently and sometimes acrimoniously disagreed. Meyer played a part in Watson's departure from Johns Hopkins. Lashley was Watson's student, and of those surrounding him in good days he was the only one who remained faithful when bad times came. (Lashley died some 6 weeks before Watson, and to spare Watson, who was very ill by then, his family chose not to inform him.) Baum incorrectly asserts that "Watson left off studying animals in favor of human babies" (p. 134). Watson studied adult humans too, and he did so in his earlier years. What occurred was a shift, part-

ly dictated by the circumstances, rather than an abrupt change. Baum gratuitously claims that William James owed his influence to his physically attractive characteristics and "brilliant polemicism" (p. 134). Even worse, he minimizes the substantial contributions to the literature of both James and Watson by asserting that James's (and by implication Watson's) "influence far exceeded what might be expected on the basis of his writings" (p. 134) (an astonishing comment by any measure).

Reluctantly, I now turn to two chapters in this book that I found offensive and that detract from it.

Kerry W. Buckley's chapter, entitled "Misbehaviorism," merely repeats the false portrait of Watson, painted by sly innuendo and biased selection of episodes, to be found in his biography of Watson, *Mechanical Man: John Broadus Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism* (1989). There was nothing of a balanced, scholarly nature and, for that matter, nothing new in that book, and there is none in its abbreviated version here. Judging by these writings, Buckley is much given to a technique of slipping in adverbs and adjectives that serve to diminish the object of the sentence. To take just a few examples, when Watson receives a pay increase at Johns Hopkins, the president of the university is said "generously" to increase his pay (thereby implying an undeserved favor or later ingratitude); when Watson writes of his frustration at complexities involved in working on human emotions, the task, it is said, "did not elicit from him an attitude of humility"; the tone of Watson's articles is said to be "brash" and "self-assured"; Watson's style is said to be "messianic"; Watson is said to have replied to a colleague "smugly," and so on. This method of adding negative colorings, each minor by itself, is bolstered at the larger scale by the selection of snippets from Watson's life and career that apparently serve the author's agenda. When all this is combined on the large canvas, the result is a portrait of a man none of us would like. But it is a false portrait. Unfortunately, correction of false impressions created in this way takes longer and demands greater effort than does the creating of them.

The second of the two chapters that sounds a discord is by John C. Burnham. He visited Watson at the Connecticut farm in 1955, less than 3 years before Watson's death. Burnham gives a brief account of this visit, which, he says, resulted in "very little content" (p. 68). This may well beg the question, why write a chapter about it? Nevertheless, the information Burnham has to offer is interesting in a neighborhood gossip sort of way. We get here a fleeting glimpse of the broken, sad, and yes, bitter Watson in the last years of his life.

Watson told Burnham about meeting some psychoanalysts, including Ernest Jones. Watson apparently also said he once sent "a friend" to see Jung. (I believe, incidentally, that the "friend" was Watson's son, who later became a psychoanalyst, but this must be taken with caution because my evidence is, at present, weak.) These anecdotes, together with Watson's published references to psychoanalysis, suggest, contrary to the established belief, that he was a person with firm opinions and an open mind, surely a rare but ideal combination for anyone who would be a scholar.

Burnham seems to find cause for complaint in Watson's offering him a glass of whisky—he says Watson "insisted"—although Watson himself did not drink any because, Watson told him, "his doctor would not let him drink" (p. 67). Burnham complains that he drank the whisky although he was a teetotaler, a fact he omitted to tell Watson. And so on, and so forth.

It is not difficult to take all this as fairly harmless gossip. In due course, however, the story becomes offensive when Burnham not only reiterates but embellishes the picture of Watson as a "ladies' man." He suggests that Watson "may have been one of the great lovers in all of history" and that "each

time" he inquired from others about Watson's work he "heard about instead . . . some woman with whom he supposedly went to bed" (pp. 69–70). Regardless of whether Burnham is merely reporting what others said to him, or he has, with the passing of time, embellished what he had heard, this is falsehood. It is more offensive to the memory of Rosalie Rayner Watson than to John Watson because, by the time the interview took place, Watson would not have cared what "they" say.

Watson's son James B. Watson has written on this subject as follows.

> He had all of the he-man attributes of Ernest Hemingway, but he limited his hunting prowess to clay pigeons on the skeet range. . . .
> He was well before his time in his advocacy of sex education, people living together without marriage, and freedom from the normal sexual inhibitions so prevalent in the 20's and 30's, but while voicing these revolutionary principles along with those on child raising which almost got him deported, he maintained a superb sense of ethicacy, decency and responsibility. (1981)

It is interesting to note, in passing, that these lines might as well have been written about Bertrand Russell (with whom Watson continued to correspond long after he left Johns Hopkins). The reader may recall that Russell, who was a visiting professor in the United States, was actually deported for views quite similar to Watson's, on the grounds that he advocated what was then called "free love." (He wrote a book on the social problems of the institution of marriage.) Fortunately for Russell, however, his scholarly reputation did not suffer, because at that time, in the circles in which he moved, persecuting one for doctrinaire reasons was not the practice.

The editors bear a responsibility for letting the "some woman with whom he went to bed" commentary get into print without any substantiating evidence. The point here is not about censorship, but relates to the editorial responsibility of filtering out unsupported conclusions. Many a reader of this journal will be familiar with the practice of editorial rejection on these grounds; it is an entirely appropriate, if at times infuriating, practice.

The remaining chapters to which I have not specifically referred provide interesting reading, and although I do not agree with some of their assertions, they raise stimulating issues. On balance, then, Todd and Morris have edited a good book. It is, I think, a book that not only behaviorists but all who aspire to scientifically understand the behavior of organisms (that is, the *behavior* of organisms, but perhaps even better, the book and the behavior) have a duty to read. But they must read it questioningly, bearing in mind that the chapters are dealing with facts that have been mixed with, and buried under, false information for many decades. All falsehood could not have been separated from facts at one fell swoop, and it has not been. Nevertheless, this is a good start, and the issues I raise must not be allowed to fade. In case the reader dismisses them as merely a matter for history, even if interesting, let me end as follows. I borrow a metaphor from the great psychologist Kenneth MacCorquodale: The camel's nose is in the tent. The camel in the case of John B. Watson was ignored and therefore entered the tent and devastated its contents. Another camel has its nose in the tent with the other great behaviorist of our times, B. F. Skinner. Tolerating that state of affairs for one great scholar does not bode well for the next scholar, and it does not bode well for behaviorism.

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