
Book Reviews — Comptes rendus de lecture

JOHN A. MILLS

Control: A History of Behavioral Psychology

New York: New York University Press, 1998,

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Reviewed by KURT DANZIGER

Another history of behaviourism? The title of John Mills' book promises more than that, and it is a promise richly fulfilled by the text. Behaviourism in the narrow sense may now be a topic of essentially historical interest, but behavioural science is quite another matter. American (including Canadian) psychologists, as Mills reminds us, "are trained to think behavioristically from their earliest undergraduate years, usually without being made aware, or realizing, that this is the case" (p. 1). Within this academic culture, behaviouristic assumptions and precepts have acquired a self-evident status that goes with low visibility.

If better vision is desired, Mills' book will supply the necessary corrective. It does so by stepping outside the present and examining the stations on the path followed by behaviourist thought and practice in its conquest of the discipline. Although these broader effects are a constant presence, the examination is conducted with scrupulous attention to specific historical evidence. Mills not only engages the considerable secondary literature in fruitful discussion but also marshals important facts and insights gained from his own archival research on the unpublished correspondence, diaries, and seminar notes of key figures. Without such evidence, who would have suspected, for example, that behind the apparent aridity of Hull's neobehaviourist system there lurked a determination to offer a homegrown American alternative to the alien import of Gestalt psychology?

But if such revelations are to become more than historical curiosities they need to be seen in broader perspective. And Mills' book provides the basis for that too. To continue with the example, the Americanism of the behavioural approach emerges in several different contexts and at a number of levels. Not only were there early and persisting links between this approach and the politics of American Progressivism, but in its ultimate values and commitments behavioural science

was deeply beholden to the pragmatic variants of positivism current in North America rather than to the logical positivism imported from Europe.

Such insights into the social and intellectual context of behaviourism and its progeny are not new, but Mills certainly offers the most comprehensive, accessible, and elegantly argued account of the topic that is currently available. Moreover, he balances contextualist history with detailed analyses of significant issues that arose in the course of psychological research in the behaviourist mode. Here you will find all you ever wanted to know but were afraid to ask about such topics as Hull's goal gradient hypothesis or Skinnerian autocalitics.

Mills' most important contribution, however, lies in his masterly analysis of the presuppositions that characterize the behavioural approach. In contrast to the hasty polemics that have sometimes disfigured this area, Mills presents what are clearly the fruits of a lifetime of study devoted to the issues. Repeatedly, he bends over backwards to make the strongest possible case for this or that behaviouralist position and shows that, nevertheless, it is both logically and empirically indefensible. Ultimately, these positions represent the product of culturally sanctioned acts of faith.

Though the specific theoretical and practical contexts might have varied historically, Mills identifies certain unshakable and interrelated features that have always characterized behavioural psychology. First, a technological imperative dictates that theorizing should be guided and circumscribed by potential practical applications. This goes hand in hand with an antispeculative attitude that conveniently conceals a pragmatist version of positivism which constitutes behavioural psychology's own florid philosophical basis. It is also linked to a conception of science and its practice ("prediction and control") that Mills regards as mighty strange when measured against the way the natural sciences have generally conducted their business. As for the specific content of its psychological theories, behavioural psychology has consistently based that on an implicit and taken-for-granted theory of human nature of the utilitarian variety.

Unfortunately, these tendencies do not represent a closed chapter in the history of American psychology. In the final pages of his book, Mills indicates that reports of behaviourism's demise appear to have been greatly exaggerated. He is sceptical of the notion of a more recent paradigm change and hints at some remarkable affinities between what often passes for

cognitivism in psychology and the logical behaviourism of the post-World War II period. At the same time, his book contains abundant evidence that the more specific behaviourist hypotheses have, on the whole, had a remarkably brief shelf life. There is therefore a distinction to be made between these behaviourist ephemera and the much more stable ideological commitments that have underpinned the enterprise of behavioural psychology for almost a century. It is a distinction that might have been spelled out more explicitly in this book; however, in the light of the historical evidence presented, readers are not likely to miss it. For anyone whose training or goals go beyond a technician's interest in psychological science this book will be an indispensable resource.

John Mills is Professor emeritus of Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan.

Kurt Danziger is Professor emeritus of Psychology at York University. He is author of *Constructing the Subject* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *Naming the Mind* (Sage Publications, 1997).