Outline and Evaluate the Behaviorist approach in Psychology. (12 MARKS)

Two types of conditioning contribute to the behaviorist approach in Psychology: Classical Conditioning and Operant Conditioning.

Classical Conditioning is the idea that behavior is learned through experience. Ivan Pavlov, a physiologist who was originally experimenting on the digestion of dogs, discovered Classical Conditioning. He noticed that the dogs would salivate upon hearing the door, and that the dogs had made an association with food and the door. This theory involves an Unconditioned Stimulus (in Pavlov’s, the food) an unconditioned response (saliva), a neutral stimulus that would be trained into a conditioned stimulus (the bell) and a conditioned response (Saliva). Timing is crucial in presenting the UCS and NS. They have to be presented immediately or fractions apart, otherwise an association would not be made. The dogs would also create the same response even if the bell were at different pitch. This is an example of Stimulus Generalization.

Operant Conditioning is the idea that behavior is learned through consequence. Skinner discovered this. Skinner experimented on rats and pigeons to create these desired behaviors. Skinner used reinforcement to either increase (positive or negative reinforcement) or decrease (aversion or punishment) the likelihood of this behavior. Skinner used a Skinner box to create controlled conditions. In this box, there was a response lever where the rats or pigeons would respond to the words “peck” or “turn”. The behaviors could be changed to what was desired. Reinforcement can take place in three ways: Continuous, partial or random. Partial reinforcement is shown to be the best way to create a continuous behavior, however random can be more effective in more complex beings such as humans, as it seems more like chance and can become addictive, alike gambling. It was also found that Aversion isn’t affective when trying to create desired behaviors with animals, as they would not notice if their food was taken away from them, they are much less complex than humans.

Strength of classical conditioning is that it has led to treatments for phobias, called Systematic Desensitization. Systematic Desensitization eliminates a fearful response that is associated with the feared stimulus (CS) by replacing the conditioned response (Fear) with a calm response (new association formed). This is a strength because the theory has led to an effective treatment for a mental disorder, and thus, has improved peoples lives.

However, both Classical conditioning and Operant conditioning do not acknowledge the role of thought or thinking as a cause of behavior. Because behaviorists are only interested in observable Phenomena, they do not study or acknowledge the effect of our thoughts on behavior. This is a weakness because most psychologists agree that humans (and perhaps some animals) do have thought processes that affect our behavior, therefore this theory is too simplistic.