

The Scientific Assessment of B.F. Skinner

Featuring Noam Chomsky

Behaviorists believe three main things:

- Firstly, there is no innate knowledge
- Secondly, anti-mentalism
- Thirdly, behaviorist learning mechanisms will work for any stimulus and any response

However, nobody believes this anymore, and that to some extent, the claims are mistaken.

Noam Chomsky

Noam Chomsky reviewed B.F. Skinner's book, Verbal Behavior, and it became the most important book review in human intellectual history. Chomsky's critiques shattered the foundations of behaviorism.

- Noam Chomsky argued against Skinner's claim that human behavior is shaped by reinforcement and punishment, and that these notions are either plainly wrong, or so vague as to be unfalsifiable and uninteresting

Example:

Why do people talk to ourselves?

Why do we imitate things sometimes?

Why do we create art?

Give bad news to enemy or fantasize without pleasant situations?

Skinner:

We do these things because of reinforcement. The reinforcement could be abstract at times, making it rewarding.

Chomsky:

It's either false or empty.

It's not true in a literal sense that these things are reinforcing, even though you get some sort of food, or pat on the head, or gift, or something that gives you pleasure as soon as you do it.

Chomsky's point is, when you make reinforcement so abstract, you lose any explanatory power.