
The Intellectual Dismissal of John B. Watson

Notes on a Dark Cloud in the History of the Psychological Sciences

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John B. Watson's substantial interest in development, his theoretical views about it, and his extensive research into developmental phenomena have been ignored much to the loss of the discipline. This paper briefly indicates the extent of the body that work and suggests that despite changes in developmental methods and theory in the intervening decades, Watson's contributions retain their significance for and relevance to contemporary literature on development.

"Psychology is that division of natural science which takes human activity and conduct as its subject matter." So wrote John B. Watson in the opening sentence of his much discussed and seldom read book, *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (1919a, p.1). It is of greater interest to the readership of this publication, specializing in the study of human development, that he concluded the book with the following paragraph.

Our personality is thus the result of what we start with and what we have lived through. It is the 'reaction mass' as a whole. The largest component of the mass if we are normal consists of clean-cut and definite habit systems, instincts which have yielded to social control and emotions which have been tempered and modified by the hard knocks received in the school of reality. (1919a, p.420).

Since the time the concluding paragraph was published, the meanings of many words in the language have shifted in part, through the ubiquitous practice of "operational definitions" in psychology, and in part through the natural dynamic processes of language. For that reason, the paragraph may require some translation. "Reaction mass" was a characteristic phrase of Watson, meaning the way the whole integrated individual responds to environmental events; "habit system" is any established pattern of behavior in a given context; and "instinct" is unlearned disposition to respond in a given way in a given context.

To many readers of these lines, this concluding statement will seem self-evident; however, it was by no means so at the time it was written. It does not propose an original insight because others, mostly philosophers, had previously noted it, but it was important in its introduction into psychology, which had been floundering as a fledgling science.

Psychology had been floundering, unable to move beyond its established practices to find its place amongst the sciences.

So far, it had been unable to find the sound foundation to claim its place amongst the natural sciences. It is this foundation that John B. Watson provided for psychology, and it is to this legacy that all who read these lines are indebted.

Watson, in harmony with the prevailing intellectual climate of the times, believed in the supremacy of science, and trusted the prospect of curing our social and individual ills by the use of scientific knowledge. Indeed, he thought *only* scientific knowledge could deliver us from our sufferings. He wrote:

...behaviorism ought to be a science that prepares men and women for understanding the principles of their own behavior.... I wish I could picture for you what a rich and wonderful individual we should make of every healthy child if only we could let it shape itself properly, and then provide for it a universe in which it could exercise that organization. (1925, p. 303)

Now we can, of course, question the feasibility of this ambition regarding, for example, how we would provide the universe for the individual so that he or she could exercise his or her 'organization', that is, the sum of all habit systems. Nevertheless, with this belief, Watson set about to discover as much as he could so as to help to build this science of behavior. His main scientific interest was in infant behavior and development because, as he saw it, this is the stage where an individual would be 'shaped.' The much cited, and much distorted 'little Albert' research needs no description here. Unfortunately, not only that research, but also Watson's view on development and how it can be planned and influenced has been distorted. In fact, in the latter case, the argument against Watson was bolstered by a fraudulent—yes, fraudulent—quotation. His position was ridiculed by quoting the by now infamous sentence:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and yes, even beggar man and thief regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, and race of his ancestors. (1925, p. 104)

But the very next sentence is "I am going beyond my facts and I admit it, but so have the advocates of the contrary and they have been doing it for many thousands of years." (1925, p. 104). To take a quotation from its context and distorting its meaning is disgraceful practice, unacceptable in any respect-

able scholarship; writer after writer repeating the same misleading quotation in publication after publication--obviously without going to the original--is abhorrent to good scholarship. It is, moreover, sad comment that Watson's extensive research into developmental phenomena, both during his academic life and, even less recognized, after his departure from the academy, has remained almost unknown. This short paper is not the place to give a full description of that forgotten work. So, let a few examples suffice.

Mary Cover Jones (1974) has described Watson's supervision of her research, which was later published in Jones (1924) and Jones and Jones (1928). Concerning Watson's work with her there is an aside which should, I think, serve as an admirable object lesson to all senior readers of these lines: "He would not co-author my papers because, as he said, his name was well known, and I still had my reputation to make. He wanted me to have all the recognition. In his book *Behaviorism*, he wrote: 'While I spent considerable time as consultant and helped plan her work, Mrs. Mary Cover Jones conducted all of the experiments and wrote up all of the results [Watson, 1924, p.132].'" (1974, p. 583). It should be noted that this work was conducted several years after Watson's departure from academic life. Few other examples, listed here only by their titles, will serve to indicate Watson's uninterrupted involvement in the study of development: "Emotional reactions and psychological experimentation" (1917, with J. J. B. Morgan), "A schematic outline of the emotions" (1919), "What the nursery has to say about instincts" (1925a), "Experimental studies in the growth of the emotions" (1925b), and, of course, the book, "Psychological care of infant and child" (1928, with R. R. Rayner). This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Concerning the book (1928) cited above the following is, perhaps, worth noting. It seems that almost the only point remembered about its contents is Watson's advice to parents that they should "never hug or kiss [their children] never let them sit on your lap." (1928, p. 81) It seems not known, however, that Watson changed his position about that. In 1936 he wrote, "*Psychological Care of Infant and Child* was another book [the other was *Behaviorism*] I feel sorry about...because I did not know enough to write the book I wanted to write." (1928, p. 280, with R. R. Rayner)

One question, amongst many others, that should be asked is why Watson's work was so shabbily treated by the psychological community. The answers to this are many, and they must await a longer treatise to examine the issues. There are, however, two amongst them that can briefly be stated. First, as Watson himself readily noted, the roots of behaviorism go further back than the time he wrote about it. Lloyd Morgan's book, *Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (1894) set the beginning of 'animal psychology' which necessarily required research into behavior.

In addition, Pavlov's discoveries of conditioning, Darwin's theory of evolution indicating continuity across species, and Thorndike's theory of learning based on research into animal behavior, gave rise to the Zeitgeist for the emergence of behaviorism. Watson, in advocating behaviorism, took a further step and argued that to be a natural science psychology must adhere to the principles that are basic to all sciences, including the

principle that what is studied must be public, in other words observable by more than one person. It followed from this that the science of psychology should study behavior *and nothing else*. It was this exclusionary edict that alienated many established psychologists of the time because it clearly implied that the enormous volumes of the work of many decades, based on reports of introspection, could not be included in such a science; it would have to be discarded or, at best, ignored. This implication was at the root of the ground swell of attacks on Watson's views. The second reason is less commendatory. Watson's departure from the academy apparently left the field free to take his ideas, research propositions, etc. and use them without citing Watson. As a result his more promising ideas came to be known as other writers' and Watson's work became consigned to history books as if they had no contemporary relevance in the decades immediately following his departure and, in some instances, continuing to the present.

Some of the assertions in this short article will seem strong to the reader who will, quite justifiably, wish to see persuasive evidence supporting them. I ask not that the reader take as given the undocumented statements, but only that she or he suspend judgment until a comprehensive account of the tragedy of the life and works of John B. Watson, this harshly treated genius of 20th century becomes--I hope in the reasonably near future--available.

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