

20. Skinner Placed: A Commentary on Place's 'Skinner Re-Skinned'

DANIEL C. DENNETT

Before turning to the substantive and interesting question of what Skinner is right or wrong about, I must first address the record-keeping question of who said what about what Skinner is right or wrong about. Place's paper attempts to correct some of my criticisms of Skinner and some of my defenses of Skinner, but he does not get my views quite right, so his criticisms fall wide of the mark. Place sometimes ends up proclaiming against me just the view I also expressed. It is probably my fault, for writing too allusively the first time around (Dennett, 1978¹), so to make amends I will first attempt to set out, more straightforwardly, what I take the issues to be as they arise in Place's chapter. This will permit me to summarize, for Skinner's reaction, the joint and several objections Place and I have raised to his work.

Place has five points to make, and I will comment on each in turn.

(1) 'What Skinner thinks is objectionable about mentalistic idioms is that they involve the ascription of dispositional properties to the behaving organism.' It is certainly true that this is one of the central themes in Skinner's attack. I drew attention to it in a footnote, where I noted that, for example, in *About Behaviorism*, 'a particularly virulent attack of operationalism tempts him to challenge the credentials of such innocuous "scientific" concepts as the *tensile strength* of rope and the *viscosity* of fluids' (1978, p. 328, fn. 12). Place illuminates Skinner's antipathy for dispositional terms by reminding us that Skinner should be viewed as reacting to Hull's profligate postulation of intervening variables (a point I alluded to on p. 57). So I agree that one of Skinner's objections to mentalism is its postulation of dispositional properties. But that is not all there is to it, for Skinner or for Place. For to say of a stimulus that it is aversive or reinforcing is to attribute a dispositional property to it (as Place notes), and Skinner obviously has no quarrel with that dispositional property. It is rather the postulation of covert,

'internal' dispositional properties of or in the organism that Skinner objects to (as I said, p. 56).

When Skinner tries to lodge all the dispositional properties in the external stimuli, he gets into more trouble than Place acknowledges. Unlike iron filings and magnets, or projectiles and brittle vases, stimuli and organisms are related in complicated ways that defy this peripheralist treatment. How can Skinner explain the routine fact that the very same stimulus can be aversive to one organism and not to another (of the same species, etc.)? He may not want to admit that this is to be explained by a difference 'inside the organisms', and he can direct our attention instead to the different *histories* of reinforcement the organisms have had (as if the histories did not have their current effect via some internal trace), but he cannot just say blandly that the stimulus has the dispositional property of being *aversive-to-x-and-not-to-y* — not if he wants to do credible science. (It is also true that a vase can lose its brittleness — by being heated, for instance — so that even in the case of the simplest dispositions the trade-off between agent and patient suggested by Place is costly.)

(2) '... the *virtus dormitiva* has to be construed as an argument against the use for explanatory purposes of a certain kind of dispositional property ascription.' Of course not just any kind of dispositional property ascription, but a vacuous — that is, tautological — ascription. Is the only escape from vacuity the identification of the responsible physical microstructure as Geach suggests? No. What is functionalism, if not the insistence that one can non-vacuously analyze complex dispositional states (e.g., competences) into interacting complexes of other dispositional states (e.g., beliefs, desires,) without ever descending to the level of physical microstructure? Thus, to repeat the moral of the example Place alludes to, it is not vacuous to cite Tom's belief that Macy's is uptown and his desire to go to Macy's when explaining Tom's taking the uptown bus; on the other hand, it would be vacuous, as I noted, to explain his taking the bus by citing some special 'uptown-bus-affinity' in him (p. 57). So I agree, and have agreed all along, with Place's second point.

(3) 'Intentionality arguments are ... arguments against the use of dispositional property ascriptions in scientific explanation.' Place obtains this conclusion, so far as I can see, by the simple expedient of redefining intentionality so it turns out to be a ubiquitous property of dispositions. First, Place says that I say that 'Skinner is right to repudiate mentalistic explanations for scientific purposes', which would be a fairly amazing thing for me to say, given my many defenses of mentalistic (intentional) explanations in psychology. Place draws this conclusion from my alluding to Skinner's 'gut intuition' on this score: 'in speaking of this prejudice as "an intuition", Dennett implies that Skinner is right.' If I had ever thought anyone would reason this way, I would have used another phrase, since I meant to 'imply' no such thing. I was attempting to show that Skinner was *wrong* about this. What I said Skinner was right about (almost) was that the use of intentional idioms presupposes rationality, which raises a particular danger of vacuity for some but not all enterprises within psychology.

Place will find he is in good company declaring that Quine's alignment of the language of science with the first-order predicate calculus is tendentious at best. Many have said so, and I have never denied it. So we agree on this larger point, even though Place's discussion of this matter is confusing to me in many ways. For instance, since so far as I know this incident has never before been reported in

print. I have no idea what revelation was vouchsafed to Dr John Burnheim that convinced him (and others, apparently) to use the word 'intentionality' in the way Place describes. Here in the free world I won't quarrel with their right to use the term as they choose, but I must point out that they court major confusion among those of us who use the term more restrictively to allude to what one might call the 'aboutness' of some phenomena (but not, e.g., the brittleness of glass, which surely is not about anything).

I also cannot follow Place's remarks about intensionality (with an 's'), so I am left uncertain as to their bearing on his third point.

(4) '... since dispositional property ascriptions are essential to any causal explanation, Dennett has failed to provide a good reason for endorsing Skinner's repudiation of mentalism.' Indeed I do not think there is a good reason for endorsing Skinner's repudiation of mentalism, and I agree with Place that dispositional property ascriptions are here to stay. I even agree with him that Quine is wrong to think that referential opacity disqualifies the mentalistic idioms from use in science (as I argue in 1978, Ch. 1, see esp. p. 19).

(5) (There are several different expressions of Place's final main point.) Roughly, he claims, I am right in claiming that the use of mentalistic (intentional) idioms presupposes rationality, but since rationality 'implies control of behaviour by a verbal specification', and since such a specification is only sometimes present, explanations relying on such ascriptions are only sometimes warranted.

There is, I think, a fairly clearcut distinction between behaviours controlled 'by a verbal specification' and behaviours not so controlled, but no one but Place, to my knowledge, has tried to limit all 'rational' behaviours to the former class. (When Fodor suggests the clearly related view that practical reasoning is a matter of the explicit framing and considering of hypotheses about actions, he is speaking of framing such hypotheses 'in the language of thought' — not natural human language.) In fact, as Lewis Carroll noted long ago, any such attempt is doomed to failure (see for instance my discussion in 1978, Ch. 1, p. 11). The idea that rationality is dependent on 'verbally formulated beliefs' instead of vice versa is hardly the uncontroversial claim Place takes it to be. Even the most extreme positions — e.g., Fodor's — have insisted that the capacity for rational thought and action is a precondition for language acquisition, not the other way around. So Place may proclaim that 'mentalistic explanations of behaviour can only be used with their full literal meaning in those cases where the behaviour to be explained is what Skinner (1969) calls "rule-governed" as opposed to "contingency-shaped"', but he proclaims this without apparent support and in the face of a chorus of unacknowledged contrary opinion. So in this instance I must shrink from Place's agreement with my position, since what he means by rationality is so different from what I mean when I assert that all intentional explanation presupposes rationality.

With all that sorting out of positions behind us, I can attempt a summary. Place and I agree that Skinner has not given us a good reason to shun dispositional properties, not even dispositional properties of the organism. Science thrives on such properties (operationalism notwithstanding), and so long as one avoids the outright tautological postulation of such properties, they can be put to good use.

Place and I would agree, I gather, that even the *virtus dormitiva* of opium

could be cited non-vacuously to help explain *something* — if not its capacity to put people to sleep, then perhaps its capacity to anaesthetize, or to diminish arithmetical competence, or impair performance on memory tests. There are other ways of achieving anaesthesia aside from putting to sleep; opium, unlike novocain, might be said to anaesthetize thanks to its *virtus dormitiva*. That is not very informative, but it is a start.

Place and I also agree that mentalistic explanations, even if they cannot be reduced to formulations in the first-order predicate calculus, can have their place in science. That is not so much a disagreement with Skinner as with Quine. We also agree, but only superficially, that mentalistic explanations presuppose rationality, and that this is what creates the problems about their status in psychology. I attributed this insight to Skinner as well, but not in the version Place accepts. I would certainly be interested to know which version, if any, Skinner now maintains. The question for Skinner, in my opinion, is this: of all the criticisms he has leveled against 'mentalism', which strikes him as most important, most telling? Since there are ready rebuttals to many, if not all, his charges in this vein, it would be a useful focusing of attention if we knew which of his arrows strikes closest to the bull's-eye, in his opinion. Is it that mentalistic explanations

- 1 are dualistic (imply non-physical processes),
- 2 imply a non-existent privacy,
- 3 invoke inferred as opposed to observable entities ('intervening variables'),
- 4 invoke internal as opposed to external dispositional properties,
- 5 are vacuous in the fashion of the *virtus dormitiva*,
- 6 presuppose rationality and hence are circular in psychology,
- 7 simply are dispositional (Place's reading)?

These are obviously somewhat related ways of getting at whatever one might find suspect in mentalistic or intentional explanations. Skinner has not chosen to distinguish his view sharply within this space of possibilities up to now. Does he wish to do so how? Does he think the issue is important? Place and I think so.

NOTE

- 1 All references are to Place's paper in this volume, and to Daniel C. Dennett (1978) *Brainstorms*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press and Brighton, Harvester Press, Chs. 1 ('Intentional Systems') and 4 ('Skinner Skinned').