

Arthur Koestler *The Ghost in the Machine* 1968

APPENDIX II ON NOT FLOGGING DEAD HORSES*

The initials S.P.C.D.H. stand for 'Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dead Horses'. It is a secret society with international ramifications and with a considerable influence on the intellectual climate of our time. I must mention a few examples of its activities.

The German Government during the war killed six million civilians in its death factories. This was at first kept secret; when the facts seeped through, the S.P.C.D.H. took the line that to keep harping on them and bringing those responsible to trial was unfair and in bad taste—flogging a dead horse.

The Soviet Government, during the years of Stalin's rule, committed barbarities on an equal scale, though in a different style. If you tried to call public attention to them in the progressive circles of the West, you were denounced as a cold warrior, slanderer and maniac. When the facts were officially admitted by Stalin's successor, the issue was instantly classified by the S.P.C.D.H. as a dead horse, although it went on ravaging other countries from Peking to Berlin.

English insularism, class distinctions, social snobbery, trial-by-accent, are all declared to be: dead horses, and the inane neighings that fill the air must be emanating from ghosts. The same applies to American dollar-worship, materialism, conformism. You can continue the list as a parlour game.

In the Sciences, the S.P.C.D.H. is particularly active. We are constantly assured that the crudely mechanistic nineteenth-century conceptions in biology, medicine, psychology are dead, and yet one constantly comes up against them in the columns of textbooks, technical journals, and in lecture rooms. In all this, Behaviourist psychology occupies a strategic key-position. This is the case not only in the United * See pp. 4, 9, 202, etc. 350 APPENDIX II States, where the Watson-Huff-Skinner tradition is still immensely powerful and keeps an invisible stranglehold (by 'negative reinforcements') on academic psychology. In England, Behaviourism has entered into an alliance with logical positivism and linguistic philosophy; but perhaps its most ominous influence is on clinical psychiatry. 'Behaviour therapy', as practised for instance at Maudsley Hospital, is symptom-therapy in its crudest form, based on Pavlovian and Skinnerian conditioning. The philosophy behind it is summed up in the slogan of our leading Behavioural therapist, H. J. Eysenck:* 'There is no neurosis underlying the symptoms, only the symptom itself.' (In a memorable attack on Eysenck, Kathleen Nott remarked that 'a "symptom" is always of something', and pointed out the preposterous implications of the slogan.1)

But how is it to be explained that while Behaviourism is still floating like a dense smog over the landscape, so many scientists of the younger generation, who are almost stifled by it, keep pretending that the sky is blue, and Behaviourism a matter of the past? Partly, I think, for the reasons mentioned earlier on (p. 4): though they honestly believe that they have outgrown the sterile orthodoxy of their elders, its terminology and jargon have got into their bloodstream, and they cannot get away from thinking in terms of stimulus, response, conditioning, reinforcement, operants, and so on. Sidney Hook once wrote that 'Aristotle projected the grammar of the Greek language on the cosmos', and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Pavlov, Watson and Skinner achieved a similar feat when they injected their reflex-philosophy into the sciences of life. Academics, brought up in that tradition, may reject the more obvious absurdities of Watson and Skinner, but nevertheless continue to employ their terminology and methodology, and thus remain unconsciously tied to the axioms implied in them.

A personal experience—one among many, and of a quite harmless sort—may serve as an illustration. When the American edition of *The Act of Creation* was published, Professor George A. Miller of Harvard University wrote an article-review about it in that excellent monthly, the *Scientific American*. It went on for nine columns, so there could be no misunderstanding due to shortage of space. It is not my intention to bore the reader by answering Miller's criticism of the theory proposed in the book—which would be out of place here; I am only concerned

* Professor in Psychology in the University of London, and Director of the Psychological Department at the Institute of Psychiatry (Maudsley and Bethlehem Royal Hospitals).

APPENDIX II 351

with his attitude to Behaviourism. This attitude is known, from his books and writings, as one of almost passionate rejection of Skinner, S-R theory, and the flat-earth approach in general. And yet, after referring to the attack on the Behaviourist position in *The Act of Creation*, Miller continued (his italics):

Attacks on stimulus-response theories (which represent modern associationism) are of course nothing new. When one attacks strict stimulus-response Behaviourism these days, one is on the side of the big battalions.

Yet Koestler writes as though it were still the 1930s and Behaviourism were in its prime. In 1964 most psychologists who still work in this tradition have introduced hypothetical mechanisms to mediate between stimulus and response. They think they are working on exactly the kind of processes Koestler calls bisociation; they are sure to be angered by Koestler's sarcastic misrepresentation of the current situation, and I cannot say that I blame them.²

Now I mentioned earlier on (p. 23) that the 'hypothetical mechanism' which the Behaviourists introduced 'to mediate between stimulus and response' are (as the term itself betrays) no more than face-saving devices. Even Behaviourists had to admit that the same stimulus S (e.g., the fall of an apple) may produce a variety of different responses (e.g., the theory of universal gravity); and that there must be something happening in the person's head between the S and the R, which they had left out of account. So they decided to call that something—which should be the principal concern of any psychology worth its name—'hypothetical mechanisms' (or 'intervening variables'); and then promptly swept it under the carpet so that they might return, with a clean conscience, to their rat experiments. It was a naively transparent manoeuvre of evasion, and Professor Miller is of course fully aware of this. In his most thought-provoking book (which I have repeatedly quoted³) there is no mention whatsoever of 'hypothetical mechanisms which mediate between S and R', because he rejects the whole S-R concept with justified scorn as an anachronism (p. 101n.). He is not only 'on the side of the winning battalions', but even a sort of battalion commander. Two columns after rising to the defence of Behaviourism against my 'sarcastic misrepresentations' he declares that, as regards the philosophical background 'I can admire Koestler's courageous attempt to clean out what obviously seem to him the Augean Stables of psychology. I share most of his prejudices and approve most of his aims.' Yet another column further down, at the end of the article, he concludes that perhaps, after all, the Behaviourists today are right (dead horses in Augean Stables?).

352 APPENDIX II

I have mentioned this episode because it beautifully exemplifies that ambivalence I have been talking about. Behaviourism was the milk which this generation of scientists imbibed in their cradle; and even if it was bottle-fed and made of dry powder, you may criticise your mum, but if a stranger does it, beware. Dissident Catholics, Marxists, Freudians, are liable to the same deep-rooted ambivalence. They may be doubters or rebels, but when the faith which they have abandoned is attacked from outside, they must rise to its defence; and as a last resort they will pretend that it is dead anyway, and not worth bothering about. Hence the S.P.C.D.H.

A Jesuit priest, whom I much admire, was once taken to task about the temperature and other conditions in Hell. He obviously resented these crude remarks, but replied with a sweet smile that though Hell exists, it is kept permanently empty by a loving God; so why revive this outdated controversy? ... Yet millions and millions of believers have lived, loved and died poisoned by mortal fear of everlasting Hell. I believe that the ultimate effects of atomorphic philosophy are no less pernicious, though it acts in more indirect and devious ways. I shall conclude with another quotation from v. Bertalanffy, with whose views on this subject I strongly sympathise:

Let us face the fact: a large part of modern psychology is a sterile and pompous scholasticism which, with the blinkers of preconceived notions or superstitions, doesn't see the obvious; which covers the triviality of its results and ideas with a preposterous language bearing no resemblance to normal English or sound theory, and which provides modern society with the techniques for the progressive stultification of mankind. It has been justly said that American positivist philosophy—and the same even more applies to psychology—has achieved the rare feat of being both extremely boring and frivolous in its unconcern with human issues.

?Basic for interpretation of animal and human behaviour was the stimulus-response scheme. So far as it is not innate or instinctive, behaviour is said to be shaped by outside influences that have met the organism in the past: classical conditioning after Pavlov, reinforcement after Skinner, early childhood experience after Freud. Hence training, education and human life in general are essentially responses to outside conditions: beginning in early childhood with toilet training and other manipulations whereby socially acceptable behaviour is gratified, undesirable behaviour blocked; continuing with education which is best carried through according to Skinnerian principles of reinforcement of correct responses and by means of teaching

APPENDIX II 353

?machines; and ending in adult man where affluent society makes everybody happy conditioning him, in a strictly scientific manner, by the mass media into the perfect consumer. Hypothetical mechanisms, intervening variables, auxiliary hypotheses have been introduced—without changing the basic concepts or general outlook. But what we need are not some hypothetical mechanisms better to explain some aberrations of the behaviour of the laboratory rat; what we need is a new conception of man.

I don't care a jot whether Professor A, B or C have modified Watson, Hull and Freud here and there and have replaced their blunt statements by more qualified and sophisticated circumlocutions. I do care a lot that the spirit is still all-pervading in our society; reducing man to the lower aspects of his animal nature, manipulating him into a feeble-minded automaton of consumption or a marionette of political power, systematically stultifying him by a perverse system of education, in short, dehumanising him ever farther by means of a sophisticated psychological technology.

It is the expressed or implicit contention that there is no essential difference between rat and man which makes American psychology so profoundly disturbing. When the intellectual elite, the thinkers and leaders, see in man nothing but an overgrown rat, then it is time to be alarmed.