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Review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior

Noam Chomsky

Rereading this review after eight years, I find little of substance that I would change if I were to write it today. I am not aware of any theoretical or experimental work that challenges its conclusions; nor, so far as I know, has there been any attempt to meet the criticisms that are raised in the review or to show that they are erroneous or ill-founded.

I had intended this review not specifically as a criticism of Skinner's speculations regarding language, but rather as a more general critique of behaviorist (I would now prefer to say "empiricist") speculation as to the nature of higher mental processes. My reason for discussing Skinner's book in such detail was that it was the most careful and thoroughgoing presentation of such speculations, an evaluation that I feel is still accurate. Therefore, if the conclusions I attempted to substantiate in the review are correct, as I believe they are, then Skinner's work can be regarded as, in effect, a *reductio ad absurdum* of behaviorist assumptions. My personal view is that it is a definite merit, not a defect, of Skinner's work that it can be used for this purpose, and it was for this reason that I tried to deal with it fairly exhaustively. I do not see how his proposals can be improved upon, aside from occasional details and oversights, within the framework of the general assumptions that he accepts. I do not, in other words, see any way in which his proposals can be substantially improved within the general framework of behaviorist or neobehaviorist, or more generally, empiricist ideas that has dominated much of modern linguistics, psychology, and philosophy. The conclusion that I hoped to establish in the review, by discussing these speculations in their most explicit and detailed form, was that the general point of view is largely mythology, and that its widespread acceptance is not the result of empirical support, persuasive reasoning, or the absence of a plausible alternative.

If I were writing today on the same topic, I would try to make it more clear than I did that I was discussing Skinner's proposals as a paradigm example of a futile tendency in modern speculation about language and mind. I would also be somewhat less apologetic and hesitant about proposing the alternative view sketched in Sections 5 and 11--and also less ahistorical in proposing this alternative, since in fact it embodies assumptions that are not only plausible and reasonably well-confirmed, so it appears to me, but also deeply rooted in a rich and largely forgotten tradition of rationalist psychology and linguistics. I have tried to correct this imbalance in later publications (Chomsky, 1962, 1964, 1965; see also Miller et al., 1960; Katz and Postal, 1964; Katz 1965; Fodor, 1965; Lenneberg, 1966).

I think it would also have been valuable to try to sketch some of the reasons--and there were many--that have made the view I was criticizing seem plausible over a long period, and also to discuss the reasons for the decline of the alternative rationalist conception which, I was suggesting, should be rehabilitated. Such a discussion would, perhaps, have helped to place the specific critique of Skinner in a more meaningful context.

--Noam Chomsky

References

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