



The Behavioral Viewpoint¹

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This series of lectures has been a longstanding and eagerly anticipated engagement. This is the first time that I have been asked by a theological seminary to present a series of lectures developing one central theme. So, now we find ourselves locked in mortal combat for a whole week—eight sessions! I can assure you in advance that I will enjoy the week with you.

Even as there is no one viewpoint that is adequate to represent all of theology, there is no singular viewpoint that can be rightly called *the* behavioral view. It would have been more precise to entitle this first presentation, “One Behavioral View—Mine.” Yet such a title, though accurate and adequately descriptive, would allow me too much latitude in which to roam. The major thesis of this presentation is specific; it is concerned with the aspects of human understanding that accrue from accepting humans as a doing, speaking, and behaving, active creature. The thesis consists of three parts:

1. A behavioral viewpoint is distinctive, in the same sense that a spiritual viewpoint is distinctive.
2. A behavioral viewpoint lends specificity to a spiritual viewpoint, and
3. A spiritual viewpoint enriches a behavioral viewpoint.

In brief, my thesis is that there is an inherent compatibility between the behavioral and the spiritual aspects of life, and that the study of the relationships between the two can bring understanding and skills into your relationships with others. I assume you have been spending more time and effort developing a spiritual viewpoint, and so my emphasis in this presentation—indeed in the series—will be the opposite, in order to help you strike a balance. Please accept as a basic premise that the functional unity of body, mind, and spirit must be accompanied in any responsible study of humanity.

Behavioral science is rapidly coming of age. True, we still find in our midst a few inventors of psychological “orgone boxes”² and purveyors of defunct temperament theories, but the empirical study of human behavior has paid off. Today we are not limited to hunches, insights, and intuitions. There is much that can be known. Some of the findings of research allow predictions of behavior under given conditions; predictions that are probability statements not often of the order of confidence common in the physical sciences, but highly useful nevertheless.

Perhaps we should identify *behavioral science*. Behavioral science is an arbitrary term used to identify those aspects of social science, human medicine, education, and communication in which the primary emphasis is on describing, explaining, and predicting human behavior. Psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and geography are formal disciplines within social science; these disciplines are also the primary contributors to behavioral science. Psychology enjoys the status of *Grande Dame* of behavioral science, although some of us are more inclined to see anthropology (once it comes into maturity) as a more promising correlating discipline, capable of drawing together into comprehensive theories the bits and pieces of behavioral findings from the whole range of social sciences.

¹ Presentation for the Buermann-Champion Lectureship, 1971. Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, OR. Series Title: Creative Christian Communication. (Eight sessions indicated; five documents exist in the Archive.)

² In the 1930s, orgone was the ‘dark matter’ of the universe and considered an elemental ‘life force’—essential for human health. Orgone accumulators, or orgone boxes, were created where the orgone could be collected and used to supplement human energy.

Since philosophers and theologians tend to frighten each other across their back fences, I should attempt to differentiate between behavioral science and behaviorism. Behaviorism is a particular sort of determinism that certain key behavioral scientists have embraced. Theologically-oriented philosophers have tended to frighten philosophically-oriented theologians with the somewhat exaggerated argument that behavioral science is behavioristic, therefore, deterministic, and hence atheistic. Suffice it to say that not every behavioral scientist is a behaviorist, and that many behavioristic philosophers seem to be shoddy as behavioral scientists.

From a theological viewpoint, behavioral science is the study of the creature of the sixth day—God’s crowning achievement into which he lavished his very image. A rather exciting focus for research! After a generation of being treated to books and films about the majesty of the celestial universe, the marvel of bees, the biology and physiology of the circulatory system, and the awesome power of the atom, the evangelical segment of the church may be on the threshold of discovery of the even more thrilling and more relevant marvels of the behavior of the sixth-day creature. Searching for a vision of God through telescopes and microscopes is inadequate. A richer view of the Creator is derived from a careful and detailed study of human beings! As a behavioral scientist in the dawn of the behavioral science era, I would eagerly share with each of you the respect one gains for the creativity of God as it is reflected in the creativity of men and women. For a real treat, follow along; become readers of the literature of behavioral science. As a starter, try *Psychology Today*, a remarkably careful and relatively non-sensational monthly of popularized behavioral science.

In practical terms, the behavioral view of humankind is concerned with what you can see and hear rather than what you speculate about a person. Perhaps the behavioral view is most easily illustrated by contrasting the earlier preoccupation with the study of attitudes and the more contemporary preference for the study of behavior. There was a time, not long ago, when attitudes—those mystical predispositions you can’t quite put your finger on inside a person—were thought to be the controllers of behavior. Therefore, you tried to pry into the attitudes through all sorts of attitude tests. But try as you might, you had to ask *questions*, and subject could try to conceal their true attitude by responding in a more “acceptable” way. Attitude-based studies were always full of holes. Further, “the proof of the pudding is in the eating,” and the proof of the attitude is in the way it is played out in behavior. What people believe to be important or desirable and appropriate for themselves is best learned by *watching* them. Thus, there was a major switch to observational techniques in social science not too many years ago. Even verbal responses to the earlier attitude-based instruments are now more properly called “verbal behavior”—what a person *says*, rather than what he or she *does*. And increasingly the focus has shifted from what a person *says* toward what a person *does*, and along with this shift has come the much more productive era of behavioral science inquiry. We are still interested today in what people say, but usually now it is in order to make comparisons of verbal behavior with non-verbal behavior. Common sense long ago gave a bit of folk wisdom that sums up the behavioral viewpoint rather well: “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.” Thus, behavioral scientists watch and listen, but most of all they *watch*!



Perhaps the reluctance to adopt a behavioral viewpoint in theological matters stems from anxiety over the Pharisaic stance. Mark 7 is the report of the Pharisees coming to Jesus with one of their several complaints against the disciples. This time they had caught the disciples ‘red-handed’. The Pharisees had been disciple-watching—and they drew inferences from what they saw; very behavioral! And Jesus scolded them for paying more attention to the outward acts than to the condition of the heart.

But there are two factors in this, and similar incidents, that negate their use as proof-texts against a behavioral viewpoint:

1. Jesus does not condemn the fact that the Pharisees had been disciple-watching, but that they were doing so in neglect of self-evaluation. The Pharisees had been watching in order to find faults and not watching in order to learn.
2. They had been watching in order to criticize the violation of a rule that *they* had set up. Mark 7:9 explains, “He was also saying to them, ‘You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.’” (NAS) The Pharisees were not wrong because they were watching, but because they were watching for the very purpose of condemning and their basis of condemnation revealed a flaw in themselves that they had not been looking *inward* to condemn.

Jesus had warned, “Do not judge, lest you be judged yourselves.” Matthew 7:1 (NAS) And this advice is totally compatible with a behavioral viewpoint. Behavioral scientists are generally disinterested in making value judgments on the basis of what they see in a person or in a group. They see behavior as a phenomenon to be correlated with other data, especially environmental data. They seek understanding, not judgment. Curiously, Jesus also gave other advice in the Matthew 7 context that encourages a behavioral stance but may tend to make a person judgmental in violation of the earlier precept of the passage: “Beware of the false prophets . . . You will know them by their fruits.” Matthew 7:15, 16 (NAS) Note that it does not say, “You can judge them or condemn them by their fruits.” The distinction between using behavioral observation as a basis for judgment in the sense of condemnation or rejection, and using behavioral observation as basis for identification or recognition is subtle but very significant. The distinction is important to today’s behavioral scientist—perhaps for the same reason that it was important to Jesus: the tendency to judge, while a normal human trait, must be suppressed if a person is to have the needed objectivity to truly learn about people. I am fascinated by this parallel between Jesus’ outlook and the viewpoint cultivated in modern behavioral science. It is one of many such parallels.

Briefly, some of the other consistencies between Jesus’ ways and teachings and the behavioral scientist’s viewpoints are the following:

1. Jesus saw in people worth and potentialities far greater than their present behavior would indicate. He allowed for the potentialities of development. Consider Matthew, Peter, and Zaccheus.
2. Jesus described his objectives in behavioral terms. For example, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” Mark 1:17 (NAS)
3. Jesus communicated in specific and, when possible, concrete language, making much use of the everyday experiences of his listeners as points of reference.
4. He accepted people in their own terms and dealt with them according to their own definitions of their problems before he inserted his own view of their needs.
5. He described attitudes as being the consequences of actions—a relationship not really understood or accepted until the mid-twentieth century: “. . . people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. . . . But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” John 3:19-21 (NRSV) Notice the direction of the cause/effect relationship. People *love* darkness because of their deeds—their *behavior*; people hate light because of their evil *doings*. The earlier viewpoints on attitudes would argue the opposite; that the loving and the hating are attitudes that then regulate or produce the behavior.

Sydney Harris, in his syndicated column, “Strictly Personal”³ presented a remarkably insightful treatment of love as a behaviorally-induced attitude:

How can you command people to love?” the college student asked me. . . . It comes from a poor translation,” I said. . . . There is a Hebrew construction that can only be rendered archaically in English as ‘love to your neighbor,’ and which means ‘act lovingly toward him.’ And that is the commandment. Obviously, it is not within our power to love or not love; but it is within our power to be kind or not kind, to act charitably or uncharitably.

The Bible has far too long been captured by the wrong people, for their own narrow or self-righteous purposes. If today’s young people were equipped to read it as it was written, it would prove more “liberating” to their spirits than any of the “modern” slogans they cling to so desperately. If you want to learn what love is, that’s where to go.

One of the practical implications of a behavioral view has already been suggested—that attitudes and values can be better understood if they are seen as resulting from experiences. Another practical implication is the development of a lifestyle that makes a person more able to learn from experience. Inasmuch as the development of conceptual models is one of the more practical outputs of behavioral science, following is a conceptual model representing the cycle of events through which interpersonal interaction becomes a systematic source of new knowledge and understanding.

The model here was developed from our studies of professional behavior in the Institutes for Research in Human Learning at Michigan State University. Our quest had been for a better understanding of the elements involved in that part of professional practice called “clinical experience.” We came to see clinical experience as a cycle of events; thus, the model is called the “clinical” model. There is a limitation in two-dimensional models that restricts the visualization of this concept. Please understand that the cycle is really a spiral or a helix—the flat representation in Figure 1 should not be seen as going in circles and always coming back to the same point. Think in terms of a spiral in which a third dimension represents time and/or development. But to avoid graphic clutter, we must use a two-dimensional model.

The “clinical cycle” is a representation of the three phases of operation and data processing through which a worker’s behavior takes on that characteristic called “professionally clinical.” The model was originally derived from data on professional teaching and prepared for use in the design of teacher-training experiences. But it is a generalized model, relevant to virtually any professional role in which the worker is engaged in some sort of interaction with a client. Inasmuch as the pastor is a specially trained person whose work is essentially client-oriented, a clinical view may be appropriate. See Figure 1.

There are three segments in the cycle, representing the functions of *doing*, *reflecting*, and *proposing*—leading in sequence to the next *doing*, *reflecting*, etc.

The similarity between these three elements and the experimental sequence of modern science, hypothesizing, testing, observing, re-hypothesizing, testing, etc., is not coincidental. A behavioral scientist within the field of education tends to seek out ways to make more widely available those processes through which order and reliable knowledge can be derived, whether the problem is that of a large-scale social issue or merely that of not making the same mistake twice.

Folklore says “experience teaches.” A behavioral science viewpoint says that there are ways to increase the probability that experience *will* teach and to increase the validity and reliability of what experience teaches. Thus, the *clinical cycle* is a model of “isness” in that it represents what does happen as experience teaches. But the *clinical cycle* is also a model of “oughtness” in that it suggests the sorts of skills that should be enhanced in order to increase the likelihood of effective learning through clinical experience.

³ The *Chicago Sun-Times*, Dec. 14, 1970

Thus, in the training of professional workers (including pastors?) there should be experiences designed to enhance the conceptualizing and hypothesizing skills as well as the skills of observation and inference-drawing. We should obviously provide for the sort of field experiences

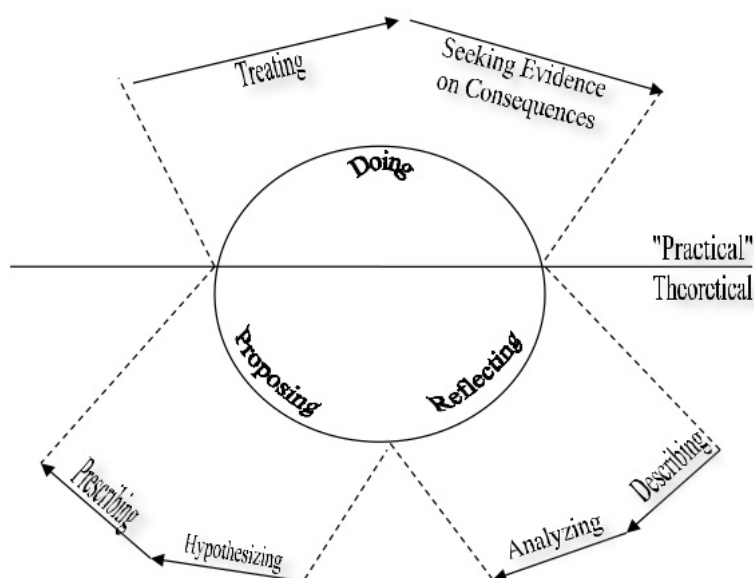


Figure 1. Model of Clinical Behavior as a matter of Learning from Experience

through which the trainees gain the practical *doing* (“experience”) through which they tests their hypotheses and gains the data upon which to reflect and from which they can derive meaning.

The clinical cycle suggested here is practical, in the sense that you can apply it to your own experiences. You can experimentally adopt it as a matter of lifestyle in your dealings with other people, formally and informally. You can make your interactions more a matter of regularized learning. In effect, you can increase the quality of your learning from experience—especially in reference to applying your cognitive experiences to the everyday and professional aspects of your life.

Please do not misunderstand. I am not suggesting some new and inordinate alternatives to cognitive input (book-learning, if you prefer.) Nor is the clinical cycle an alternative to revelational sources of learning. Indeed, we are discussing only the interactional and transactional aspects of the *walk* of the trained professional worker. But from my observations of seminary graduates, I conclude that there is a rather general need for improved skills and improved ways of getting skills of the professional practice of ministering effectively to the needs of people.

The behavioral viewpoint is worthwhile for theologians. Biblical or theological anthropology is largely a matter of precepts. Operational anthropology—the understanding of human behavior in cultural and social contexts that makes for more effective dealing with people—is interactional and essentially behavioral. That spiritual foundations give impetus for outreach to others is basic to Christianity. Thus, the spiritual aspects of life demand that we relate to people through their physical and emotional personalities. The Scriptures constitute the source for spiritual insights and understandings. Further, the Scriptures provide basic data on the nature of human beings. But no more than we expect the Bible to substitute for the telescope should we expect the Bible to substitute for systematic interactional study of men and women. A behavioral viewpoint is appropriate, and is, in fact, productive of the skills and understandings which make Christians effective in their discipleship.