Motivation
The Heart of the Matter
by Roger Hild

Motivation. The reason why: the reason why not. Anyone whose goal is to cause, influence or change their dog's behavior will have greater success once they begin to understand and work with the animal's motivation.

Such an important concept has more than its share of disagreements amongst "the experts." This becomes very clear when one takes a closer look at the ongoing debates over topics such as learning theory or which dog training methods yield the best results. In simply trying to address and change their dog's behaviour, the average dog owner risks getting caught in the crossfire from those deeply divided on the subject.

So, let's begin this exercise with a "why question." Why did the chicken cross the road? The standard answer to this cute little riddle is, "To get to the other side." Ask a group of learned behaviorists the same question and they are likely to expound on the chicken's reinforcement history coupled with a series of approximations and tied to various motivators. I like to imagine asking the chickens the same question: they'd probably tell you they do it for the amusement they garner from keeping the behaviorists occupied.

Behaviourists, despite any claims to the contrary, are not the only experts on behaviour. They are, in fact, only representative of one narrow view of behaviour. There are many non-behaviourist experts that understand explain and work with behaviour. Behaviourists are reductionist; interested only in breaking observable behaviour into tiny segments and using S-R (stimulus - response) theory to explain their observations.

The behaviorist J. B. Watson said, "The rule, or measuring rod, which the behaviorist puts in front of him always is: Can I describe this bit of behavior I see in terms of `stimulus and response'?" According to the behaviorist view of the world, we are all nothing more than organic matter interacting with the various stimuli in our environment.

Skinner, one of the most influential behaviourists and considered the father of "Operant Coditioning," said in "About Behaviorism," 1974, p. 213): "A person is first of all an organism, a member of a species and a subspecies, possessing a genetic endowment of anatomical and physiological characteristics, which are the product of the contingencies of survival to which the species has been exposed in the process of evolution. The organism becomes a person [i.e., a unique individual] as it acquires a repertoire of behavior under the contingencies of reinforcement to which it is exposed in its lifetime. The behavior it exhibits at any moment is under the control of a current setting. It is able to acquire such a repertoire because of processes of conditioning, to which it is susceptible because of its genetic endowment."

On pg.15 of "Excel-erated Learning" Pamela J. Reid wrote: "The acceptance of behaviorism went hand in hand with the rejection of the study of the mind. B. F. Skinner believed that we could understand behavior by studying the things that happen to animals. There was no need to study what was happening inside the animal's head. Understanding the laws of behavior and how events affect an animal's behavior do not necessitate understanding the mind. In fact Skinner's form of "radical behaviorism" even rejected the notion that thoughts, feelings, and emotions could cause behavior."

But is this truly the case? Are we and our dogs nothing more than organic matter that only behaves in response to various environmental stimuli? Thankfully not. Many in the scientific and academic world have begun to discredit and discard many of the tenants underlying the behaviorists conditioning theory. More of a focus is now being directed toward understanding internal motivations, cognitive processes, individual choice and purposeful action. One could say that while all conditioning is learning, not all learning is conditioning. Indeed, conditioning makes up only a fraction of learning.

In fact, Koestler wrote this about reductionism: "Yet throughout the dark ages of psychology most of the work done in the laboratories consisted of analyzing bricks and mortar in the hope
that by patient effort somehow one day it would tell you what a cathedral looked like." Arthur Koestler, "The Ghost in the Machine." NY: Random House (1967), p. 9.

Ludwig von Bertalanffy, said: "Let us face the fact: a large part of modern psychology is a sterile and pompous scholasticism which, with the blinders of preconceived notions or superstitions on its nose, doesn't see the obvious; which covers the triviality of its results and ideas with a preposterous language bearing no resemblance either to normal English or normal scientific theory; and which provides modern society with the techniques for the progressive stultification of mankind." "Robots, Men and Minds." NY: George Braziller (1967), p. 6

On p. 10 (same reference) Bertalanffy said: "The S-R scheme discards a large part of behavior which is an expression of autonomous activity: play, exploratory behavior, any form of creativity."

People had been training dogs for thousands of years prior to the mindless slide into `Skinners World,' the world of operant conditioning. Some trainers were effective and some not, some
were "humane" and some not - much as is the case today. The fact that dogs (like the rest of us) learn from their experiences and that pleasure and pain plays a role in that learning, is probably as old as awareness itself. Operant conditioning, as a teaching tool, does not give the practitioner anything new. It's evolution as a theory grew out of attempts to explain why us `organic types' behave as we do. In that sense then, operant conditioning is a theory of motivation and while it may be partially correct, it is a seriously flawed theory.

I watch a four-week-old puppy attempt to climb out of the whelping box for the first time. Every unsuccessful attempt is met with renewed determination. Why? The puppy's repeated attempts seem to violate the very conditioning theory that behaviorists hold sacred. This puppy seems to hold at least one quality in common with the likes of folks like Thomas Edison, persistence. Like the pioneer and the inventor, their motto is, "If at first you don't succeed, try,
try again." The greatest accomplishments, it seems, come from those with the determination to fail their way to success.

Skinner promoted the concept that organisms react and behave simply because of external factors. He said thought and awareness are nothing more than annoying, meaningless by-products. The result of this is that the concepts of consciousness, awareness, self-control, will, self-determinism and personal responsibility cannot and do not exist within the behaviourist's ideological frameworks. They consider such concepts as minor and of no meaningful significance. They hold the view that at best all internal subjective states, including feelings, are nothing more than chemical reactions in the brain or stimulus-response reactions to evolutionary and immediate environmental forces.

Skinner didn't believe in the inner world of the mind or that behaviour could be internally driven by thoughts, feelings, free will and conscious choice. Because he didn't believe in these factors, he had no place for them in his theory. Because his theory itself is flawed, what has since flowed from his theory has been both inconsistent and unreliable.

Here is what Arthur Koestler has to say in "The Ghost in the Machine." NY: Random House (1967), p. 17: "Historically, Behaviorism started as a reaction against the excesses of introspective techniques....At first its intention was merely to exclude consciousness, images and other non-public phenomena as objects of study from the field of psychology; but later on this came to imply that the excluded phenomena did not exist. A programme for a methodology, which had its arguable points, became transformed into a philosophy which had no point at all."

He also wrote: "Behaviorism is indeed a kind of flat-earth view of the mind." Ibid., p. 17.

And on p. 18 he wrote: "The record of fifty years of rattomorphic psychology is comparable in its sterile pedantry to that of scholasticism in its period of decline, when it had fallen to counting angels on pin-heads -- although this sounds a more attractive pastime than counting the number of bar-pressings on the box."

It is interesting to note that when behaviourism (specifically operant conditioning) fails to produce reliable responses - when the actual mind of the dog is never truly engaged, the result is often an increase in undesirable behaviours which can include aggression. Instead of addressing the holes in their training model as the root cause of the problem, the behaviorist then employs the strategy of, "blame the subject." This is often disguised by an attempt to affix a behavioural diagnosis and along with this fancy label, advise complete environmental control, employ even more conditioning strategies and if that fails suggest drugs and then death. They will not seek to engage the dog's mind in the training process - it's hard to engage that what you don't acknowledge.

What is actually at issue is one's belief about motivation. To the behaviorist, motivation is an external stimulus. There are many others however (myself included) who view motivation more as an internal event. Behaviour, especially non-reflexive behaviour, is more often a choice rather than simply a conditioned response to an eliciting stimulus. The stimulus is, in fact, quite peripheral to the behaviour which, after all, has its origins in the mind.

Alfie Kohn says: "Few readers will be shocked by the news that extrinsic motivators are a poor substitute for genuine interest in what one is doing. What is likely to be far more surprising and disturbing is the further point that rewards, like punishments, actually undermine the intrinsic motivation that promotes optimal performance...." Alfie Kohn, "Punished By Rewards." NY: Houghton Mifflin (1993), p. 68.

"The first explanation (of why rewards undermine motivation) has an appealing simplicity to it and seems to make sense on the basis of our real-life experience: anything presented as a prerequisite for something else -- that is, as a means toward some other end -- comes to be seen as less desirable. `Do this and you'll get that' automatically devalues the `this'." Alfie Kohn, Ibid., p. 76.

In correspondence on the subject of why animals behave, Dorothy C. Dunning Ph. D wrote (and I am quoting her with permission): "My major professor, Ken Roeder, was a neurophysiologist interested in insect behavior. He addressed Roger's plaint in another way.

A little terminology, to make the following comprehensible: Sensory inputs are the way stimuli get into the nervous system; motor outputs are the way behavior happens. In between is the central nervous system or brain, which links and controls input and output. Usually the behavior is a consequence of the contractions of a bunch of muscles, in a carefully orchestrated sort of way. Muscles are controlled by nerve cells called motoneurons.

When fooling around in the nervous system of an insect, he could reliably get a muscle twitch (or

sometimes several) by stimulating the motoneuron that ran to that muscle, but when he backed off, further upstream in the neural pathways that controlled behavior, the less predictable the behavior became. Even in an insect, and even in one whose behavior and nervous system were simple, he could not predict exactly what the animal would do.

So he built a mechanical model of the insect he was studying at the time, a cockroach. He endowed this machine with sensory inputs qualitatively like those of a roach, and with motor outputs controlled by those inputs in a way similar to the way roaches responded to sensory inputs. Even though he had built this "beast," he could not control its behavior as precisely as he had expected. It got into behavioral cul de sacs he had not predicted and had mechanical "nervous breakdowns." So he built a "time out" circuit into its "brain," an incandescent lightbulb that lit when the machine could not decide what to do. That was the signal for us to come watch or, if the lightbulb burnt out, to replace the thing and rescue the roach.

Roeder called this unpredictability the "evitability" of behavior, for no response was inevitable, even given complete control over it. Roeder was one of the first ethologists, those who explain behavior in terms of its adaptive significance for the animal doing the behaving, rather than in terms of stimuli and environmental control. He was the first neuroethologist, the first to recognize the significance of the fact that many neurons are not all-or-none devices, that even the responses of individual nerve cells cannot be precisely predicted, let alone the constellations of behavior they control.

If cockroach behavior is evitable, that of more complex animals like dogs and people is even more so. Watson and Skinner were guilty of hubris."

Victims of Circumstance?
It seems that for every unacceptable behaviour engaged in by either man or beast, there is an excuse. Is the dog that bites his way through limits simply acting as he must in accordance with his reinforcement history? How about the thief, the fighter or the rapist, are they, like the dog that bites, simply acting according to their reinforcement history? Are we all simply displaying the results of the reinforcement schedules to which we've been subjected and therefore victims of our conditioning?

Widespread acceptance of conditioning theory during its heyday has led to a plethora of problems we, as a society, are still struggling to come to grips with. In addition to a decline in positive results in our classrooms, we have witnessed a shift away from holding individuals accountable for their behaviour. This should come as no surprise. The concepts of consciousness, awareness, self-control, will, self-determinism and personal responsibility cannot and do not exist within the behaviourist's ideological frameworks - particularly those influenced by Skinner.

When we attempt to bring criminals to justice, lawyers, tearing a page from the behaviourist textbook, will argue, "he's not responsible." The excuses run from, "a history of deprivation" to "a history of excesses." In most cases it will be the mother, father, teacher, neighbour or just society in general that the lawyer will try to put on trial to take the responsibility for their clients
actions. The poor bugger had no choice but to steal, rape or murder - after all, his reinforcement history you know.

Does the same dynamic apply to the unacceptable behaviour of dogs? I believe it does. In the opening of this article I referenced the riddle, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" In that question, one could substitute dog for chicken and instead of, "cross the road," substitute any behaviour. Why did the dog bite the mailman? Why did the dog ignore me when I called him? In all cases the behaviourist will not hold the dog responsible but will hold it's conditioning or lack of conditioning solely responsible. According to behaviourist dogma, dogs don't make decisions; they are never contentious and they cannot be held accountable, they only respond according to their conditioning. Behaviourists, like lawyers hold that

circumstances, not individuals, are responsible.

There is no question that we all learn from our past experiences, our history. That one factor alone, however, cannot account for more than a fraction of the behaviour we see daily. We all, dogs included, are able to act outside the influence of our history. We are able to adapt and we can act counter to any conditioning, rise above it and behave differently.

Anthropomorphism the Final Taboo

Anthropomorphism is defined as the attribution of human form or qualities to that which is not human. Behaviourists hate anthropomorphism and for the most part have succeeded in making it something horrible, something to be avoided at all costs. For a professional working with animals, being labelled as anthropomorphic is akin to a government official being labelled as racist.

Most often it is the motivation being attributed to a particular behaviour that gets labelled as anthropomorphic. Examples might be: "My dog bit me because he was jealous of my new kitten."

Granted, once one starts to attribute human foibles or any motive, they run the risk of being wrong. It is also possible to become totally ineffective because one's assumptions are so far off base. I would point out however, I've made similar mistakes in trying to understand something my wife has done. Sometimes despite the best of intentions, it is possible to misinterpret.

It seems to me that viewing things in human terms is a perfectly normal thing for a human to do. The more experienced and knowledgeable we are about the subject, the more our hypothesis might be correct.

I do find it curious that among some who call themselves behaviourists, we find those who readily anthropomorphize when it suits their purpose to do so. Anyone ever wonder what is behind behaviourist terms such as, "Fear aggression" or "Separation anxiety?"

In was recently doing a little research into the subject of anthropomorphism because I was curious about the taboos surrounding it. It came as quite a surprise for me to learn of the religious origin and meaning.

The Microsoft® Encarta® 97 Encyclopedia. © 1993-1996 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved, states: "In the history of religion, anthropomorphism refers to the depiction of God in a human image, with human bodily form and emotions, such as jealousy, wrath, or love. Whereas mythology is exclusively concerned with anthropomorphic gods, other religious thought holds that it is inappropriate to regard an omnipotent, omnipresent God as human. In order to speak of God, however, metaphorical language must be employed. In philosophy and theology, seemingly anthropomorphic concepts and language are used because it is impossible to think of God without attributing to him some human traits..."

"Nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel held that Greek anthropomorphic religion represented an improvement over the worship of gods in the shape of animals, a practice called theriomorphism (Greek therion, "animal"; morphe, "shape"). Hegel also maintained that Christianity brought the notion of anthropomorphism to maturity by insisting not only that God assumed a human form, but also that Jesus Christ was both a fully human person as well as fully divine. Because Christianity incorporates humanity into the very nature of divinity, it has been accused of anthropomorphism by both Jewish and Islamic thinkers."

So how did anthropomorphism become a problem for the behaviorist? I found the following web article that was quite interesting and makes a connection to Pavlov.

http://www.google.ca/search?q=cache:lRrp2ep0fJAJ:www.psychology.uiowa.edu/classes/31190/behaviorism.rtf+Anthropomorphism++behaviorism&hl=en&ie=UTF-8

"...But, the problem of anthropomorphism is one that has for nearly a century vexed scientists interested in animal behavior. No less than the Nobel laureate Ivan P. Pavlov once adopted an anthropomorphic approach to understanding the conditioned reflexes that he and his co-workers discovered in their studies of canine digestion..."

"In the 1928 book chronicling his first 25 years of conditioning research, "Lectures on conditioned reflexes," Pavlov describes this fascinating story as involving two opposite paths to comprehending conditioned reflexes: the anthropomorphic approach and the scientific approach."

"According to the anthropomorphic approach, we should be mainly interested in the internal or subjective world of the dog rather than in its overt actions. This anthropomorphic approach assumes that the internal world of the dog--its thoughts, its feelings, its desires (if it has any)--are analogous to ours. Pavlov and his colleagues actually entertained this approach prior to 1903 in order to understand the then-called "psychical" secretions of their dogs to signals for food..."

"...This interpretive breakdown forced the researchers to abandon what Pavlov suspected was an inborn inclination for people to adopt an anthropomorphic interpretation and to promote a less familiar, but more productive objective approach. This analytical transition from anthropomorphic interpretation to a natural science approach was not an easy one to make; indeed, Pavlov described the process as involving persistent deliberation and considerable mental conflict..."

"Jennings' appeal for us to limit our consideration of both human and animal behavior to objective factors underscores the key imperative of behaviorism: to explain behavior in terms of matter and energy, thereby rendering unnecessary any psychical or mental implications. Mentalism was to play no part in this new behavioral science of the 20th century, a science which remains prominent to this day."

"Nevertheless, mentalism has staged a surprising comeback in the form of `cognitive ethology,' a field founded by the biologist Donald R Griffin. The goal of cognitive ethology is `to learn as much as possible about the likelihood that nonhuman animals have mental experiences, and insofar as these do occur, what they entail and how they affect the animals' behavior, welfare, and biological fitness' (Griffin, 1978, p. 528). To Pavlov, Jennings, and Watson, this goal of studying animal consciousness falls outside the scope of a scientific psychology that has struggled for a century to avoid such analyses of subjective experience."

"This contest between subjective and objective analyses of behavior is obviously an important one that has yet to be decided. The second century of behaviorism will have to prove to its many opponents that a natural science account of animal behavior and intelligence eclipses subjective and mentalistic interpretations."

"One area where this contest will surely be waged is the study of more advanced forms of animal cognition, like memory and conceptualization. It might be easy to dismiss salivary conditioning as a mindless form of association formation and to grant behaviorists this narrow realm of behavioral adaptation. But, it is not going to be so easy to dismiss an objective analysis of abstract conceptual behavior. The battle is joined. The resolution will have important
implications for our conceptions of animal and human behavior."

An Awakening

In an attempt to gather support for whatever point of view we might have held, we looked to science, psychology even religion. Through this process we have gained but we have also lost. We have gained in the sense that we have been able to construct certain learning models but in the process we began to see the dog in two dimensions only and we have lost sight of the fact that maybe dogs have a higher purpose.

Looking back at my earliest memories of dogs, I find myself full of wonder and joy. Here were creatures we could commune with, play with, at times would protect us and who seemed to understand what we were about. The dogs worked beside us, hunted with us, and played freely. We knew nothing of anthropomorphism, reinforcement schedules, Premack principles, Thorndike laws etc.

After I began training, I wanted to learn as much as I could and began studying the "science" of training. I learned that we shouldn't ascribe "human" qualities to dogs. I learned that dogs are the ultimate opportunists and are only interested in "what's in it for them." I learned dogs have no desire to please, can't develop a sense of responsibility, are amoral lemon brains, and certainly have no higher purpose beyond survival. I am really sorry I journeyed so far down this road before I realized that the sick feeling I had in the pit of my stomach was my reaction to the broad brush with which we were painting our "best friend." What I may have gained in the techniques of training, I more than lost in the spirit of training. Behaviourism is very two dimensional and doesn't recognize its own limits but tends to place limits where there should be none, if it's not measurable on our instruments – it doesn't exist; if it can't be reproduced in the lab – it's not valid; biology is the only valid motivation – spirituality is not.

Adopting a "scientomorphic" attitude (a term used by Vicki Hearn) we run the risk of losing sight of the dog. Science would, I believe, have us view dogs in only a very primitive state (only as biological specimens). I believe dogs are capable of developing a basic moral sense, can show altruistic motives and can enjoy meaningful relationships. I believe these factors are also important in understanding motivations behind certain behaviors.

When it comes to training, I believe we are responsible to teach the desired behaviour BUT once it is learned we can hold the dog responsible and ultimately I believe the dog can develop their own internal sense of responsibility. You see, I also believe dogs have a sense of dignity and can take pride in getting the job done properly.