

## The status of private events in behavior analysis

William M. Baum

Department of Psychology, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH  
03824-3567

Electronic mail: w\_baum@unhh.unh.edu

There are two key questions about private events. I shall call them the privacy question and the causality question. Lubinski & Thompson (L&T) failed to address either of them directly, perhaps by design, but a full discussion can hardly avoid them.

The privacy question concerns the meaning of the word "private." There are two possible uses. In the first, often considered to be common sense, a private event can only be known to its possessor. It seems self-evident to some people, for example, that thoughts can only be known to the one who thinks them. According to this notion, private events are private *in principle*, can never be known to another, and therefore are qualitatively different from public events. The claim, made by some behaviorists, that private events are exactly like public events except in the size of the audience – private events always having an audience of one and public events having an audience greater than one – cannot remove the dichotomy. For example, how does one distinguish between a public event that happens to have an audience of one (i.e., occurs when the actor is alone) from a private event? If size of audience were the only criterion, then my yawning when I am alone would be a private event but would become a public event if my wife were there to see it. This would contradict the notion that private events are private in principle, because it is a practical matter whether my wife happens to be there or not. Thus, if private events are private in principle, there remains some unstated, unanalyzed other criterion.

The alternative use of "private" makes it a purely practical affair. In this view, there really is no difference between the privacy of a yawn when I am alone and the privacy of a thought or feeling. No private events are private in principle; thoughts and feelings can be known in principle, if only we take the trouble to observe them or invent apparatus to observe them. This idea depends upon an article of faith, the faith that with enough technical advance, even the subtlest thought or feeling in one person can be observed by another. One has to imagine, for example, hooking electrodes to a person's head, connecting the electrodes to a machine with a screen on it, and if the person thinks *I feel tired*, the words "I feel tired" appear on the screen along with a display of neural inputs showing whether this was a true statement of the person's feeling or not. This view at least has the advantage that it truly makes no distinction between private and public events, thereby leaving no mysteries. Its disadvantages are that it contradicts common sense by seeming to trivialize the word "private" and that it rests on an article of faith that cannot be disconfirmed.

The second big question about private events, the causality question, concerns their causal status with respect to behavior. In the commonsense view, it seems self-evident that thoughts cause behavior. Behaviorists usually deny this, maintaining that order of occurrence need not imply causality; if I think about walking and then walk, there is no necessity that the thought cause the action. Skinner often insisted that behavior cannot originate within the organism, not even in a private event. Instead, he maintained, behavior always originates in the envi-

ronment, in the public domain. The validity of his assertions rests crucially on the word "originate." On the one hand, it conveys the importance of history, because origins of behavior are always in the past, never in the present. On the other hand, it may represent an attempt to avoid using the word "cause." If "originate" means nothing different from "cause," then Skinner's assertions would contradict his proposal that private events are of the same kind as public events.

Perhaps the most consistent policy for behaviorists would be never to use the word "cause." Emphasis would then go onto the trio of genetics, history, and present circumstances to explain behavior. This would favor functional explanations instead of mechanical ones. A difficulty arises, however, with the behavior analysts' substitute for immediate causality, the concept of "stimulus control," central to L&T's discussion. If stimulus control has anything to do with "originating" behavior, then stimulus control by private events suggests that private events, in some sense, *do* "originate" behavior. You cannot have it both ways, insisting that private events cannot originate behavior and at the same time insisting that private events are just like public events and can exert stimulus control over behavior just like public events.

We return inevitably to the first question: Just what distinguishes private events from public? Behavior analysts are caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, if the distinction is retained, it preserves the very dualism that radical behaviorists thought they had escaped. No mental causes seems to mean no mind-body problem. Does the mind-body problem merely surface again as the question of how a private event can exert stimulus control over public behavior? On the other hand, if the public-private distinction is dismissed, we run the risks of implausibility and inadequacy. Methodological behaviorism is attacked because it disregards the inner world of thoughts and feelings. Radical behaviorists claim they *do* treat thoughts and feelings – as private events. Has this ploy really worked?

The great strength of radical behaviorism is its avoidance of dualism. If it fails in that, it can hardly claim superiority over commonsense psychology. Even if one might wish it otherwise, the only way to preserve this superiority is to deny *in-principle* private events. The resultant faith in instrumentation and ingenuity might be compared with faith in determinism. If all events are *in-principle* public, however, how different is the position from methodological behaviorism?