

# BEHAVIORAL THEORY

METHODOLOGICAL BEHAVIORISM (WATSON)

OBSERVABLE, MEASURABLE BEHAVIORS LEARNED THROUGH INTERACTION WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

RADICAL BEHAVIORISM (SKINNER)

BEHAVIOR SHAPED AND MAINTAINED BY ITS CONSEQUENCES

By [redacted] & Taylor Ehlinger



## THE BEHAVIORIST MOVEMENT (1913)

- Reaction against introspective psychology, which relied on subjective reports of mental states and processes (National University & NU Editorial Contributors, 2023)
- Argument: Psychology should be a science of observable and measurable events and behaviors; mental states and cognitive processes are irrelevant or inaccessible.
- People are not born with pre-set traits or instincts that drive behavior. Behavior is acquired through classical conditioning (learning by association) and operant conditioning (learning through consequences; Simply Psychology, 2025).

JOHN B. WATSON (1878-1958)



Photo courtesy of Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology

- Father of American behaviorism
- Rejected the study of internal mental processes, arguing that since thoughts, feelings, and desires cannot be directly observed, they have no place in scientific psychology (Simply Psychology, 2025)
- Nature vs. nurture: Behaviorism emphasizes how environmental factors shape behavior and excludes innate or inherited factors.
- The human mind at birth is a tabula rasa (Latin for "blank slate"), ready to be written on by experience.

Human behavior not inherent

Strict blank-slate view

Model involved an organism's response to stimuli

### KEY DISTINCTIONS

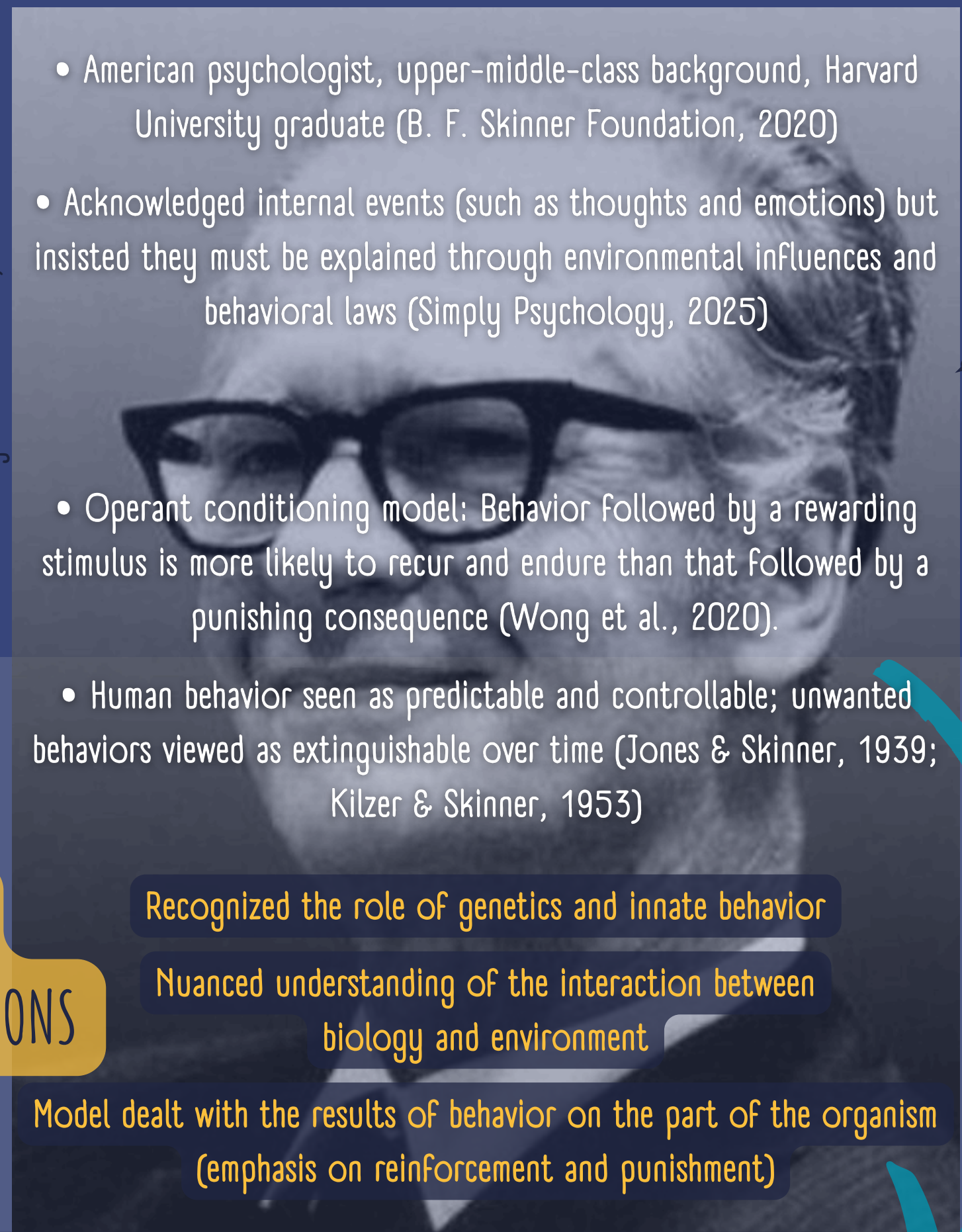


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- American psychologist, upper-middle-class background, Harvard University graduate (B. F. Skinner Foundation, 2020)
- Acknowledged internal events (such as thoughts and emotions) but insisted they must be explained through environmental influences and behavioral laws (Simply Psychology, 2025)
- Operant conditioning model: Behavior followed by a rewarding stimulus is more likely to recur and endure than that followed by a punishing consequence (Wong et al., 2020).
- Human behavior seen as predictable and controllable; unwanted behaviors viewed as extinguishable over time (Jones & Skinner, 1939; Kilzer & Skinner, 1953)

Recognized the role of genetics and innate behavior

Nuanced understanding of the interaction between biology and environment

Model dealt with the results of behavior on the part of the organism (emphasis on reinforcement and punishment)

B. F. SKINNER (1904-1990)

(LibGuides: History of Psychology (September 2024): John B. Watson, B. F. Skinner, and Behaviorism, n.d.; Simply Psychology, 2025)

Humans are driven by emotions, environment, genetics, and biology; they are too complex to be entirely explained/controlled through binary systems (Koch, 1964; Machan, 1974).

Behaviorism could be used to justify an overly punitive approach to social control (Chomsky, 1967).

### CRITIQUES

Doesn't account for complex mental processes like language acquisition, memory, and problem-solving (Simply Psychology, 2025)

Too simplistic and deterministic; neglects the role of cognition, emotion, and social factors in human behavior (National University & NU Editorial Contributors, 2023)

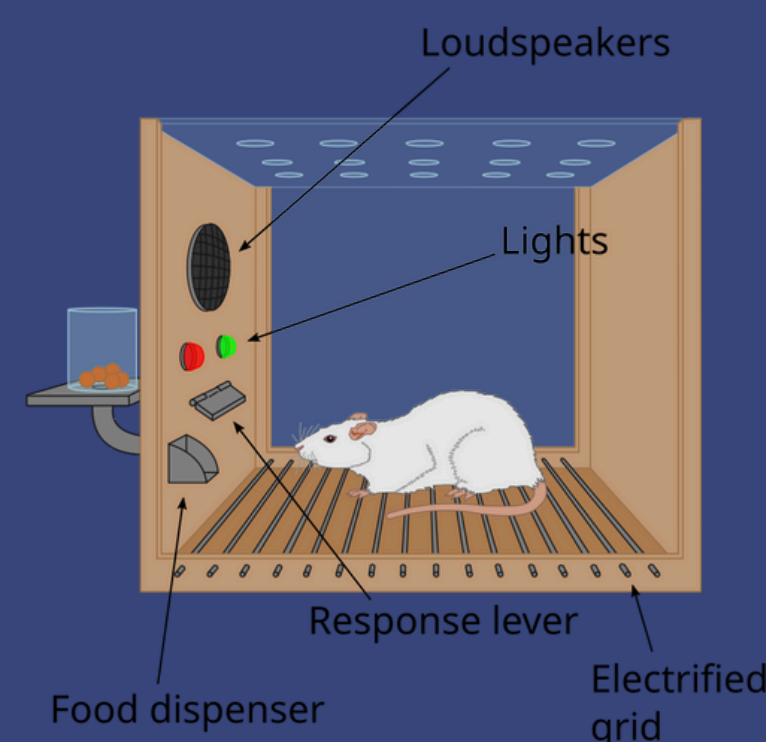


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## THE SKINNER BOX

To test out his theories, Skinner created the "Skinner Box"—a small chamber that isolated test subjects (often rats or pigeons) from their external environment so their responses to rewards and punishments could be studied in various ways (Jones & Skinner, 1939; Skinner, 1937).