JOHN BROADUS WATSON, PSYCHOLOGIST FROM TRAVELERS REST

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In 1913, a professor of psychology at Johns Hopkins University issued a clarion call for a new and objective science of behavior, diametrically opposed to the dominant introspective psychology of the day. He proclaimed that even the most complex forms of learned behavior could be built up by using a series of conditioned reflexes, and that every response could be reduced to physiologial changes in nerves and muscles. When his theories appeared in book form in 1925, the New York *Herald Tribune* called it "perhaps . . . the most important book ever written," and the New York *Times* declared, "It marks an epoch in the intellectual history of man." The title of the book was *Behaviorism*, and its author was John Broadus Watson, a native of Greenville and a graduate of Furman University.

Today, Watson is once again receiving recognition as the originator of the theory of behavior modification, a field which has in the past few years made a quantum jump in the practice of psychology. Dr. B. F. Skinner of Harvard University, who recommends development of a technology of behavior that will enable us to solve the increasingly complex problems caused by physical and biological technology, says that it was Watson's theory which offered him a convincing way to study behavior. Watson's stimulus-response techniques in recent years have been expanded in very sophisticated ways. He is now becoming the object of numerous graduate theses and dissertations and at least two biographies are being written.

The author of a 1956 article in *Psychological Review* (63:265) wrote: "Second only to Freud, though at a rather great distance, John B. Watson is, in my judgment, the most important figure in the history of psychological thought during the first half of the century. Nor was his impact limited to the science of psychology."

The American Psychological Association in 1957 cited Watson in these words: "To Dr. John Broadus Watson, whose work has been one of the vital determinants of the formal substance of modern psychology. He initiated a revolution in psychological thought, and his writings have been the point of

departure for continuing lines of fruitful research."

In a history of the kindergarten by Evelyn Weber (1969), the author commented: "By his painstaking methodology and his complete discreditation of introspection as a procedure, Watson put new life into the child development movement . . . . His direct effect upon the kindergarten was to reinforce the importance of stimulus situations and to emphasize the significance of the child's early training."

During the twenties and early thirties, Watson had been a household word because of the many articles he wrote for popular magazines, expounding his theories on child management. He had been the subject of numerous articles, notably in the *New Yorker* (1926), the *New Republic* (1929) and *Fortune* (1936). But other psychological theories, especially psychoanalysis, soon supplanted behaviorism, and Watson was largely forgotten, especially forgotten in his native town. It is time to get acquainted with this eminent American.

In one of the volumes of *History of Psychology in Autobiography,* Broadus Watson tells of his beginnings. He was born January 9, 1878, near Travelers Rest, his parents being Pickens Butler and Emma (Roe) Watson. The old Roe home still stands on the Roe Ford road and is presently occupied by Mr. and Mrs. J. Lake Thomas. The modest Watson cottage can be seen near Slater Mill.

He wrote:

> My earliest academic memories, relate themselves to district schools in areas in South Carolina called Reedy River, White Horse, and Travelers Rest. From the age of six I trudged two miles to one or another of these places. At nine years of age I was handling, tools, half-soling shoes, and milking cows. At 12, I was a pretty fair carpenter. This manual skill has never lost its charm, and in the summer of 1909 and 1910 I built a ten-room house from blueprints.
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> In 1980, when I was 12 years of age, my family moved to Greenville, a village of 20,000 souls, where I entered the public schools . . . . I have few pleasant memories of these years. I was lazy, somewhat insubordinate and, so far as I know, I never made more

than a passing grade. I used to have a friend by the name of Joe Leach, with whom I boxed every time the teacher left the room, until one or the other drew blood. "Nigger" fighting was one of our favorite activites. Twice I was arrested, once for "nigger fighting" and the second time for shooting off firearms inside the city limits . . . . I entered Furman University in 1894 as a sub-freshman, and stayed there five years, taking an A. M. instead of an A. B. I earned my way for two yeas in the chemical lab as an assistant. Little of my college life interested me . . . . I was unsocial and had few close friends. The only real friend I had during my high school and college days was George Buist . . . . In my senior year, I was the only man who passed the final Greek exam. I did it only because I went to my room at two o'clock the afternoon before the exam, took with me one quart of Coca-Cola syrup, and sat in my chair and crammed until time for the exam next day . . . . My mathematics is equally poor. I would never have passed in the course if Professors [Marshall] Earle and [Love] Durham had not practically written my exam papers for me.

A funny incident apparently made me decide to become a Ph. D. in psychology and philosophy. Professor Gordon B. Moore in my senior year one day said in class that, if a man ever handed in a paper backwards, he would flunk him. Although I had been an honor student the whole four years, by some strange streak of luck, I handed in my final paper of sixteen pages in Civics backwards. He kept his word. He flunked me and I had to stay another year, taking an A. M. and not an A. B. I made an adolescent resolve then to the effect that I'd make him seek me out for research some day . . . . (During my second year at Hopkins, I received a letter from him asking to come to me as a research student. Before we could arrange it, his eyesight failed and he died a few years later).

This failure of college to mean anything to me in the way of an education gave me most of my slants against college. Those years made me bitter . . . only with the years have I reached a point of view to the effect that, until college becomes a place where daily living can be taught, we must look tolerantly upon college as a place for boys and girls to be penned up until they reach majority -- then let the world sift them out.

Mr. Ralph Hawkins of Greenville, a first cousin of Watson, had described a tragic incident of their youth. His brother Hampton Hawkins and Broadus Watson were about the same age and good friends. They were going to Chicago together, in

1899, and had hired a livery stable rig to take them out to Concrete school to bid farewell to a girl, Maud Cely. Because there had been a recent Negro uprising, Broadus told Hampton to take his pistol. As Hampton was loading it, the derringer slipped out of his hand and he shot himself, dying three days later.

Mr. Hawkins also noted that on Broadus's infrequent visits to Greenville thereafter, he seemed to "have grown big in his ideas." The scandal attendant upon his subsequent divorce and remarriage, plus Broadus's atheistic beliefs, made him somewhat *persona non grata* at home. Indeed, the mother of the slain Hawkins boy declared that she had rather have her boy dead than to be an atheist like Broadus.

In the file on John Broadus Watson in the Furman library are comments made in recent years in reminiscent vein.

Dr. Benjamin Eugene Geer in 1961 recalled him as "a nonconformist in college and in later life. He explored theories and ideas for their sensationalism. His brother Edward was deeply religious and looked on Broadus as the black sheep of the family." Edward married Miss Belle Manly, daughter of a Furman president.

Mrs. T. T. Goldsmith described him as a fine-looking man, highly thought of when he lived in Greenville. His mother, she said, was a leading Woman's Missionary Union worker.

A Miss Lucile Birnbaum, researching her dissertation at the University of California on Watson and Behaviorism, theorized that his psychological formulations were nothing if not a "moral jeremiad on the perversity of human nature, which he means to bring under control."

She explained her reasoning in this way:

> This non-conformist had almost an obsessive passion, overriding logic and scientific evidence, to prove that the orthodox method of learning to be moral by pain and punishment was not only scientific but the only way to bring about any social reform. That is, he rejected religion violently on a formal level and incorporated it on a scientific level.
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> What Watson hated most was hypocrisy, and this, I think, is

partially the basis of his rejection of religion because it condoned the psalm-singing, sanctimonious hypocrites who prayed on Sunday and were not at all Christian the rest of the time. He himself indicated that the techniques used by religious revivalists were very effective. He used these same techniques in putting across Behaviorism as a theory in the 20's when he took his case to popular audiences across the country.

Now let us pick up our subject again as he was leaving for Chicago. He had graduated from Furman number fourteen in a class of twenty, and had spent the year 1899-1900 as principal of the Batesburg (S. C.) Institute trying to earn enough money to start his graduate work at the University of Chicago. At the university he worked as a janitor, waited on tables, and delivered books to a library on Saturdays; he also kept the white rats for a professor's experiments. He had to borrow the $350 it cost to publish his dissertation, but at the end of three years he had a Phi Beta Kappa key and a doctorate in experimental psychology. He stayed on as assistant in experimental and comparative psychology and as director of the psychological laboratory.

His work with animals led him to conclude that both lower and higher animals learn exclusively by trial and error, without reasoning. The appointment in 1908 as a full professor at the Johns Hopkins Universiy gave him access to the finest experimental facilities in the country. During the summers he studied terns on Dry Tortugas island; monkeys and rats also were the subjects of innumerable experiments. In 1912, he began to publish his findings, mainly in *Psychological Review*, which he edited for seven years. He insisted that man "should be treated in psychology exactly as the animal is treated, to the extent of considering only what he does in a controlled situation and making no note of what the man himself observes or thinks during the experiment . . . ."

The advent of the First World War sent him into the aviation section of the Signal Corps, where he worked on the release of homing pigeons from balloons and planes. Then he was sent to Britain to administer intelligence tests to aviators; shortly thereafter he was nearly court-martialed for his overly frank

opinions on the efficacy of tests on equilibrium which consisted of spinning a man around in a cage. His reaction to the army experience was characteristically explosive: "Never have I seen such incompetence, extravagance, or such a group of overbearing, inferior men."

Returning to Johns Hopkins, Professor Watson examined newborn infants at two hospitals and concluded that heredity is a minor factor in man's actions. The only unlearned reactions of a human infant that he could discover were fear, anger, and love. He adopted Pavlov's term for learning, "conditioning."

He published his theory in 1919 in a book called *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist*. Reaction from fellow psychologists was immediate, and a fierce debate ensued. His opponents considered him to be an egotist, deliberately setting up his theory to place him in the leadershp of a psychological movement; others applauded his efforts to shed a bright light in the grey areas of subjective psychology.

Watson defined Behaviorism as "the theory that the human being could be taught to be and to do almost anything; that personality and habits could be 'built in' by conditioning." Every response is guided by the presence or absence of a reward. Thousands of controlled experiments, both his and those of other psychologists, backed his theory. But in his exuberance and in his determination to take his case to the public, Watson soon went to extremes, announcing that he could train a youngster to be any kind of a specialist, from a physician to an artist, regardless of this talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, or race. He incurred the wrath of women's groups by telling mothers not to fondle their children or give them too much attention. He blasted out at mothers who were excessively affectionate, thereby conditioning the child to be emotionally unstable and dependent. For many years he wrote articles for the popular magazines of the day -- *Harpers, Saturday Review, Collier's, The Nation, Good Housekeeping*, etc. Among the titles were "How We Think," "Memory as the Behaviorist Sees It," "Myths of the Unconscious," "Weakness of Women,"

"Can We Make Our Children Behave?"

Watson made many important contributions to the specialized field of infant psychology; he did research in neurology, and studies on the effects of drugs. He founded the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* in 1915.

It seems ironic that the advocate of controlled behavior should have met his nemesis in the form of a seemingly uncontrolled response to a social stimulus. The distinguished professor, who had married Mary Ickes in 1904 and had two children by her, fell in love with one of his pupils, Rosalie Raymer, the daughter of a prominent Baltimore family. Mrs. Watson sued for divorce and the scandal hit the front pages of the New York and Baltimore papers. At the trial, the name of the co-respondent was carefully kept out of the testimony; the divorce was granted, December 24, 1920, and the professor's marriage to Miss Raymer took place the following day. The trustees at Johns Hopkins demanded Watson's resignation.

So wrecked was Watson by the experience that he was on the verge of a breakdown. The academic world was closed to him. He had a brand-new wife and no job, no prospects. An advertising agency in Chicago offered him a job investigating the market for rubber boots on the shore of the Mississippi; after that, he sold coffee. Returning to New York, he took a job at Macy's selling groceries, but its object was to study consumer psychology. He entered the advertising business, making glands sell toothpaste and conditioning housewives to all sorts of prejudices about coffee. So successful was he in this new game that he became vice president of J. Walter Thompson, and later of William Esty and Company.

On the side, he acted as a consultant for a study on behavior that resulted in a methodology for eliminating children's fears. He was still writing articles and publishing books. He had a beautiful home in Westport, Conn. He enjoyed his two hundred horsepower boat in which he cruised around Long Island Sound. He was fond of pound cake, bridge, farming, riding,

and highballs. He is described as a fine-looking man, medium tall and strongly built. His long-time secretary, Ruth Lieb of New York City, wrote of him as follows:

> Dr. Watson enjoyed farming -- and I don't mean gardening. He had a large vegetable garden of several acres, ate only tomatoes and corn himself but grew everything and made up baskets for the neighbors every week.
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> Also he was a great builder. As a matter of fact, he said "the people who work with their hands will not go out of their heads." While at Johns Hopkins he built a summer home for his first family in Canada. It was a three story house and it was a good house. When he and his second family moved to Connecticut, the architect built the house. Dr. Watson did all the buildings on the property -- garage, tool house, two-story barn with three stalls for horses, an apartment for the live-in farmer, and a big party room, lavatory and pantry on the second floor. This done on weekends and vacations.

Miss Lieb also said that Dr. Watson was too shy to attend the meeting at which the American Psychological Association presented the citation noting his contributions. His son, Dr. William Watson, accepted the citation for his father.

Watson's picture can be seen in the gallery of Furman University's Hall of Fame. His Alma Mater had bestowed the LL. D. degree upon him in 1919, six months before the big scandal broke.

John Broadus Watson died in New York, September 25, 1958. In his later years he had been received back into the academic community, which for many years had resented his affluent success in the world of business. He had appeared in *Who's Who in America* at age twenty-nine, by far the youngest psychologist ever to have been so honored; he was dropped for a couple of years but reinstated with a twenty-nine line sketch in the 1926-27 volume.

His successor at the University at Chicago, Professor Harvey Carr, lauded him in these words:

> I admired his tremendous energy and enthusiasm in both work and play, his irrepressible spirits, his intellectual candor and honesty, and his scorn of verbal camouflage and intellectual pussyfooting.

> He once remarked that it was possible to write a psychology in purely objective terms -- starting with the simple reflexes and proceeding to the more complex varieties of mental behavior. Here were the essential features of his Behaviorism long before he heard of the work of Pavlov and Bechterev.

Today, wherever the origins or techniques of behavior modification are discussed, the ghost of John Broadus Watson, late of Greenville, South Carolina, walks again.[1]

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[1] In April, 1979, the Department of Psychology of Furman University honored the memory of the outstanding contributions of John B. Watson with a two-day symposium featuring the dedication of the psychology laboratory in Watson's honor, and addresses by three eminent American psychologists, Dr. James N. McConnell, Dr. Fred S. Keller, and Dr. B. F. Skinner.