

Essay Title: Discuss the contribution of behaviourist psychologists such as Pavlov and Skinner to our understanding of human behaviour. (16 marks)

Behaviourism is one of the most influential approaches in modern psychology. Its central claim is that almost all human behaviour is the result of learning. To explore the learning process, behaviourists favoured the laboratory experiment over other methods because this kind of research was objective. i.e. it focused on observable events, and could be rigorously controlled.

A good introduction outlining key specialist terminology from the onset.

One of the first behaviourists to explore the relationship between learning and behaviour was Ivan Pavlov. Pavlov developed the theory of classical conditioning and famously tested it using his dogs, who were conditioned to associate the sound of a bell with food. This resulted in the dogs producing a salivation response at the sound of a bell even when no food was present. Pavlov demonstrated that repeated exposure to an event leads to a learned and uncontrollable behaviour.

An accurate summary of classical conditioning is provided.

Developing these ideas, B.F. Skinner suggested that behaviour was the result of learning through the consequences of our actions. Skinner conducted research into his operant conditioning theory using rats, and found that three types of consequences will affect behaviour: Positive reinforcement involves rewarding a behaviour, which increases the likelihood of it being repeated; negative reinforcement involves removing an unpleasant outcome to increase the likelihood of a behaviour being repeated; punishment involves adding an unpleasant outcome to a behaviour, which reduces the likelihood of it being repeated. For Skinner, behaviour is the result of learning and remembering the consequences of previous behaviours.

A well-detailed and accurate summary of operant conditioning, with key specialist terminology used throughout.

Behaviourists have significantly contributed to the still-developing recognition of psychology as a science. The experimental methods used by Pavlov and Skinner rejected the earlier emphasis in psychology on introspection and encouraged research that focused on more objective, because more measurable, dimensions of behaviour. According to behaviourists, this emphasis on the scientific method has led to an increasingly valid and reliable understanding of human behaviour. These methods have also helped psychology gain credibility and status as a scientific discipline, which in turn attracts more funding and

An effective evaluation point highlighting the positive impact of the behaviourist

research opportunities.

approach.

The behaviourist approach was also influential in encouraging the use of animals as research subjects. Behaviourists believed that the learning processes in humans and animals are very similar; consequently, Pavlov conducted research using dogs, and Skinner used rats and pigeons. Using non-human animals in research gives experimenters more control over the process, without demand characteristics or individual differences influencing findings. However, many consider using animals in experiments to be unethical as there is less concern about protection from harm for non-human subjects. Furthermore, some argue that findings from animal experiments are not generalizable to human behaviour: Skinner's operant conditioning theory may provide an understanding of rat behaviour, but little about human behaviour. From this perspective, behaviourists have arguably made a limited contribution to explaining human behaviour, as the biology, experiences, and capabilities of different species are extremely different.

An effective evaluation point drawing on the use of animals.

An interesting counter-criticism of animal research is presented and applied to the behaviourist approach effectively.

Finally, the behavioural approach has made important contributions to our modern understanding of mental illness. For example, many phobias are thought to be the result of earlier unpleasant learning experiences. Consequently, this understanding has helped psychologists develop therapies, such as systematic desensitisation, that attempt to re-condition a patient's fear response. Also, some addictions such as gambling can be better understood through operant conditioning, as the rewards of gambling could be seen to reinforce the destructive behaviour. This demonstrates that the behaviourist approach has many real-world applications in the understanding and treatment of atypical behaviour.

The application of the behaviourist approach to treating phobias provides another effective evaluation point.

[554 Words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark Band 4**

This is a well-detailed and accurate account of the behaviourist approach and its contribution to psychology. The evaluation is well-detailed, thorough and effective drawing on a range of points. The use of specialist terminology is excellent and adds clarity and focus to the essay.