

## A NOTE ON SOME CRITICISMS OF THE MOWRER/EYSENCK CONDITIONING THEORY OF CONSCIENCE

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In a recent paper Argyle (1964) has presented a brief criticism of the Mowrer/Eysenck theory which attempts to account for the process of socialization and the development of conscience in terms of Pavlovian conditioning (Eysenck, 1964). Argyle makes several criticisms which, however, seem to be based on a misunderstanding of the theory. For instance, he argues that according to this theory: 'The more children are punished the stronger should be the superego. As far as physical punishment is concerned the opposite is found.' This argument confuses the distinction between punishment and aversive conditioning, and as this confusion appears quite widespread it seems desirable to put it right. The Mowrer/Eysenck theory makes use of the concept of conditioning in which the time interval between CS and UCS is well known to be extremely important; aversive conditioning only takes place if the UCS is administered very soon after the occurrence of the CS. Punishment is an all-embracing term which would include aversive conditioning but also the administration of UCS at time intervals far exceeding those at which it could reasonably be expected to aid in the formation of conditioned responses. Thus the occurrence of punishment as such may be, and often is, quite irrelevant to the occurrence of conditioning. I have discussed this point at great length in *Crime and Personality* because it seems to me a cogent argument against the hypothesis that legal punishment is efficacious in producing control over antisocial behaviour in situations where the individual concerned is not under surveillance. My position is thus identical with that of Argyle when he says that: 'The role of physical punishment seems to be restricted to control of behaviour in the presence of the punitive agent, but has little carry-over to other situations.' Thus Argyle advances the same criticism of legal punishment but seems to regard it as a criticism of conditioning theories. This does not seem to be logical or permissible. The type of conditioning I had in mind was that which occurs very early in the child's life when a misdemeanour is *immediately* followed by a slap, withdrawal of love, or some other punishment administered within the time interval known to produce Pavlovian conditioning. (It might be added in parenthesis that the fact that 'numerous studies show that delinquents have received more physical punishment than others' may easily be explicable in terms of my theory by suggesting that it is in these children that early conditioning has failed and that it is because of this failure that punishment was later administered.)

Argyle did not consider another point to which I have devoted a chapter. My argument is, and I have supported it with some independent evidence, that emotion may lead to the consolidation rather than the suppression of criminal behaviour, and that punishment may, through increasing motivation, have the effect of promoting rather than suppressing the behaviour which is being punished. There is ample evidence for this proposition (Church, 1963) and taken in conjunction with the points

made in the preceding paragraph these considerations seem to render nugatory Argyle's earlier criticism.

Argyle goes on to argue that 'It is withdrawal of love which seems to produce true superego formation; if this can be interpreted as a more severe kind of punishment than physical punishment the theory could stand, but there is nothing within the theory to suggest why this should be so.' This is a complicated point but it may perhaps be argued that the comparatively light punishments which are meted out to most children by their parents acquire a stronger negative reinforcement value because they are regarded as evidence of withdrawal of love in those children where there is a strong positive relationship within the family. Evidence for this comes, although somewhat indirectly, from the Solomon experiment described in detail in *Crime and Personality*; he found that aversive conditioning in puppies was much more effective in those who had been fed by the experimenter (who administered the aversive treatment) than in those who had been fed automatically.

Argyle concludes his brief section on avoidance conditioning by saying that: 'The theory is quite unable to explain the sequence of events which we are calling introjection', but this statement may be criticized on two grounds. In the first place he has made no attempt to produce such an explanation in terms of avoidance conditioning, and to assert a universal negative of this kind is not sufficient by itself for the statement to be taken seriously. In the second place the evidence for the 'sequence of events' in question leaves much to be desired. I will concentrate on only one point which for me seems to be crucial. Argyle throughout relies on correlations between parental behaviour, values, etc., and children's behaviour, values, etc., for evidence that the former in some causal way produce the latter. As I have argued elsewhere this is one possible explanation for the existing correlations, but there are alternative explanations which are not even considered by Argyle. To take but one example, it is often quite plausible to assume that a certain type of behaviour in the child (e.g. refractoriness) may call forth a certain type of behaviour in the parent (e.g. punitiveness); such a sequence of events might be completely misrepresented by explaining an observed correlation between child's refractoriness and parent's punitiveness in terms of the latter producing the former. Even more important, in terms of the evidence cited in *Crime and Personality*, is the possibility that child's behaviour and parent's behaviour are correlated because of genetic factors. According to the genetic model the correlation between parental behaviour and child's behaviour is due to hereditary causes directly or indirectly determining both, giving rise to correlations which it would be quite erroneous to interpret as evidence of a direct causal relation between parent's behaviour and child's behaviour. It is of course customary in modern psychological writings to over-emphasize environmental factors and to disregard alternative hypotheses, but it should be emphasized that there is no scientific rationale for preferring one interpretation to another. It should be the duty of anyone dealing with correlational evidence of this kind to discuss impartially the various feasible interpretations rather than arbitrarily select the one which is more in accord with his hypothesis.

There are, I think, two criticisms which may justifiably be made of the Mowrer/Eysenck hypothesis. The first of these is that very little is in fact known about the exact details of the early upbringing of children, and the effects different methods

may have on their behaviour and their 'conscience'. It is to be hoped that the formulation of the theory will lead to more pointed research in this area. The other criticism is that the possible influence of operant conditioning (positive reinforcement of desirable activities) has been overlooked too much. There is an obvious reciprocal inhibition of 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, and the possibility cannot be gainsaid that in many cases the building up of good habits through positive reinforcement may lead to a reciprocal inhibition of bad habits, without the necessity of postulating a 'conscience' acquired through the Pavlovian type of aversion conditioning process. Given this addition to the theory, however, I feel that it can encompass satisfactorily all the known facts in this field and can lead to better experimentation than has characterized the past thirty years.

#### REFERENCES

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*(Manuscript received 12 January 1965)*