

SSIBlings

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Letter from the President

Alan N. Epstein

Some of you will remember that in my last message from this corner I promised you all a scolding over the bad language you use. Many of you call your subjects *organisms*, use the word *stimulus* to mean anything that causes behavior, and talk about *the nervous system* as if there were only one kind. If you are guilty of any of these gaffes you are being foolish or worse in public and I hope that what follows will help you stop making a fool of yourself.

We seem to have picked up the bad habit of using the grand and dignified misnomer of "organisms" for the animals we use from the psychologists, and to understand why doing so is a semantic scandal recall who our subjects are. Except for the Houpts who are single (or rather double) handedly maintaining our respectability as a comparative science we and the psychologists use a few pests (rats and mice), a few pets (cats and dogs), and a few primates (man and some monkeys) in our research. Now, these are all mammals, and mammals are rare among animals because, in addition to having backbones which is rare enough, they have hair, are warm-blooded, and suckle their young which makes them very rare indeed in the animal kingdom. But I won't quarrel here with calling them animals which is far better than calling them organisms because most organisms are *not* animals. Putting aside the microscopic creatures and considering only those that can be seen with the naked eye, remember what they are. If you're having trouble remembering, look out the window or if you are in a high-rise city close your eyes and think of the outdoors. Almost everything that you see that is not man-made is an organism, from the grass on the ground to the trees overhead. Most of the things that are alive out there, on the surface of the earth and in the seas as well, are green and produce food by some kind

of photosynthesis, and are therefore plants. The few plants that behave (slime-molds, algal zoospores, the sensitive and insectivorous species) express their behavior without a nervous system, and the insectivorous plants, which are the only plants known to me that have anything that can be called ingestive behavior, capture and digest insects as a defense against predation rather than as a nutritional necessity.

With that said, why are the few mammals that we work with so grandiloquently misnamed? It's done, I think, for two reasons, one of which can be understood, the other of which can hardly be forgiven. The "O" word is used most often by theoreticians of behavior and by colleagues working on learning, affect, and other complex behaviors who are motivated by the lofty idea that their work should lead to generalizations. Most of them work on rats and pigeons but want to say something memorable about other animals and especially about man, so they have adopted a grand sounding name for the animals they are talking about and have forgotten that it is the wrong word and that to some listeners what they are saying is biologically absurd (classical conditioning in crabgrass, dandelions, and other garden weeds? affective expression in the bristlecone pine?). (*cont.*)

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