Chapter 3: Habit, Capitalism, and the Fantasy of the Behaviorist Subject

[NOTE: this is the second draft of a chapter that still (as you’ll see) needs some direction. I’d appreciate any suggestions for what needs to be developed.]

The neoliberal regime that has taken hold over the last century or so would appear to represent a triumph over habit: by deregulating finance, privatizing public commodities, regularly moving operations to where labor is cheapest in the global market, and using state resources to shore up (and bail out) financial institutions, it has steadily chipped away at impediments to the continuous flow of capital. Thus, twenty-first century capitalism operates faster and more efficiently (within a cycle of crises), with the effect of creating staggering concentrations of wealth in the realms of finance and consumer capital. But, not surprisingly since the functioning of capital is most intimately bound up with labor, the work force is the area in which it appears to have the most widespread and noticeable success in the removal of impediments – in the case of human bodies, these impediments being routinization and the sense of stability that characterized labor in the industrial economy. In his 1998 critique of the New Economy, The Corrosion of Character, Richard Sennett identified what has since become a truism – i.e., the traits necessary for workers to thrive in the post-industrial capitalist world:

Today the phrase ‘flexible capitalism’ describes a system which is more than a permutation on an old theme. The emphasis is on flexibility. Rigid forms of bureaucracy are under attack, as are the evils of blind routine. Workers are asked to behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal procedures. (9)

Capitalism today would thus appear to be resolutely anti-habit – against “rigid bureaucracy” and “blind routine”; stability, sedimentation, or ossification. As Sennett and others have argued, the hallmark of post-industrial capitalism has been a sustained, systematic effort to de-habituate workers. Positive response to flux within companies is identified as one of the most desirable worker traits in contemporary business advice manuals, as is youth and an embrace of flexible thinking and risk-taking behavior. The structure of work has been changed to encourage workers’ insertion into a system of ever on, just-in-time production via flexible workweeks,
telecommuting, and the accompanying technologies (cell phones, high-speed Internet) that make such things possible.

Thus, what would appear to be required of workers in post-industrial capitalism is a lack of habit. [However, what I will show in this chapter is that habit, at least as it operates in classical behaviorism, is really the foundation of capitalist subjectivity.]

The best and one of the earliest explanations of this somewhat paradoxical condition of contemporary subjectivity comes from a somewhat unlikely source: John Broadus Watson, one of the earliest advocates of behaviorism in psychology and the author of the so-called "behaviorist manifesto." While he is acknowledged as a figure of historical interest, mostly in psychology textbooks, for first articulating the concept of behaviorism in psychology, Watson’s ideas are typically dismissed as the unfortunate products of an era in which science was applied assiduously to questions of human perfectibility and social control. Indeed, Watson’s belief that habits formed the basis for the predictability and control of behavior on a broad social scale (especially in the form of advertising, his post-academic career) would seem to be the essence of a Progressive scientific program. However, habit functions in Watson’s work in a less obvious but perhaps more interesting way: over the course of his career in the middle of the Fordist era, he laid out, however roughly, what can be recognized three-quarters of a century later as the conditions of subjectivity necessary for post-industrial capitalism.

Flexibility would seem to be the anti-habit; however, as Watson's work (and the work of others) shows, habit is actually central to flexibility; hence being a good post-industrial capitalist subject is predicated on a) having habits, and b) being able to continually overcome those habits and form new ones in response to changing circumstances.

**Flattening Psychology's "Mystery Box"**

Watson tends to be portrayed by psychology textbooks as a revolutionary figure, someone who flouted the established methodologies of the time and forged a new paradigm for psychology. While this view is slightly distorted, it’s true that the behaviorist program as Watson described it
did eventually succeed in capturing the attention of the general public and the advertising industry alike, and in the 1920s and 30s “behaviorism” enjoyed a fair amount of recognition and cache. Partly this was because behaviorism was so much a product of the spirit of the Progressive times – as the historian Kerry Buckley notes, “The possibility of an objective science of behavior control appealed strongly to many whose progressive faith in science led them to believe that it was only a matter of time before factual and methodological problems would be solved” (qtd in Johnston 158). The behaviorist program was grounded in the observation of subjects’ habits, which then overtly served as a theoretical means of controlling that subject (a familiar modernist trope). It is this that is most closely associated with classical behaviorism. However, as I will show, habit actually worked in more complex ways in Watson.

Watson first gained notoriety in the field with the 1913 publication of "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It," an article which became known after the fact as the "behaviorist manifesto." In it, Watson makes a case that the fairly young discipline of psychology needed to change its focus: from the reigning methodology of “introspectionism,” which attempted to understand faculties like perception and sensation, to behaviorism, which was, according to Watson, “a purely objective experimental branch of natural science” whose goal was “the prediction and control of behavior” (158). Shifting psychological methodology from an introspectionist to a behaviorist model, Watson hoped, would bring psychology more in line with the hard sciences. And more importantly, it would shift psychology’s focus away from the study of consciousness. Though introspectionism was an experimental program, Watson argued that it was inherently unscientific, since the existence or nature of consciousness could not be empirically verified. The study of consciousness was based on a depth model: as Watson wrote,

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1 How revolutionary Watson's "manifesto" was has been disputed by historians of psychology. As Alan Costall points out, even one of Watson's teachers critiqued Watson for claiming that behavior was a new object of study, when really what was new was the objective method for studying. Franz Samelson states that "none of the autobiographies of prominent psychologists of the period have marked [the publication of Watson's "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It"] as a red letter day" (400) and that "This rather detailed...account of recorded reactions to Watson stands in definite contrast to some retrospective histories which claim or at least imply that Watson's behaviorism, supported by an anonymous Zeitgeist, quickly swept the field" (410). However, Samelson believes that despite the lack of reference to Watson and behaviorism until after WWI, there was more of a shift, most obvious in the change in psychologists' description of observation - whereas when introspectionism dominated the field observation was defined as X, after Watson introduced behaviorism, objective observation was defined as Y. Regardless of behaviorism's impact on academic psychology, though, the more applied fields of psychology (of which Watson spoke approvingly in "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It") were quick to adopt Watson's philosophy and methods. Henry Link said that "Watson's work is, in fact, the conscious methodology which practically all recent literature in industrial psychology has more or less explicitly implied" (qtd in Samelson 419). Henry Link, "The Application of Psychology to Industry," Psychological Bulletin 17 (1920): 335-346.
"The world of physical objects (stimuli, including here anything which may excite activity in a receptor), which forms the total phenomenon of the natural scientist), is looked upon merely as means to an end" (Behaviorism 1). In other words, action at the surface of the organism (the subject speaking about his perception of the color red, for instance) was interesting to introspectionists only for its revelation of something happening "inside" or below the surface of the organism. At the same time, what happened at the surface was the only evidence of the existence of any internal activity. This meant that introspectionists could never really access consciousness, their primary object; they could only make guesses based on what they observed or on what their experimental subjects told them about their reactions. Introspectionist psychology, Watson argued, made consciousness into a "mystery box" that served as a catchall for mental phenomena that it could not explain. By doing so, it rendered itself scientifically irrelevant (Behaviorism 49). And so, Watson concluded, "The time seems to have come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness; when it need no longer delude itself into thinking that it is making mental states the object of observation" (163). In other words, one might say that what Watson wanted was a psychology without the psyche.

While in the introspectionist paradigm, behavioral data serve as signifiers, interesting only insofar as they "may throw light upon conscious states" (2), Watson's reframing of psychology collapses the signifier/signified pair in order to make behaviors refer only to themselves and nothing beyond. In his early work, Watson characterized even thought - in a commonsense view seemingly the most internal thing of all - as nothing but internal speech, which (he claimed) could be physically observed as small movements of the larynx. Later he would make the same claims of other functions that would seem to be central to consciousness, like memory and language, or "word habits" (Behavior 20). Rather than the introspectionist depth model of an inner consciousness reflecting to the outer surface of the organism, then, Watson's behaviorist model portrayed the (human or animal) organism as all surface: a metaphorical flattening of the organism.

Shelving (or at least ignoring) consciousness thus allowed the behaviorists to focus on what happened at the observable surface of the body. In a behaviorist psychology the fundamental unit of study thus becomes no longer consciousness, but habit: “It is possible to write a
psychology…in terms of stimulus and response, in terms of habit formation, habit integration, and the like” (Behavior 9). In Watson’s reformulation of the goals of psychology, psychology is no longer interested in description (a metaphysical goal), but in prediction and control of what can be empirically observed (a pragmatic goal).

**Modernist Science: Habit and Control**

Though he recognized them as complex systems of habits, in his early experimental work Watson treated organisms less as holistic entities than as a series of simpler habits or reflexes for the purposes of establishing a more finely grained level of control, the purpose of behavioral analysis being "the reduction of complex congenital (instinct) and acquired (habit) forms of response to simple reflexes" (Behavior 53). Watson's analytic focus - his interest in breaking down the complex behaviors of organisms into a series of simpler habits or reflexes - allowed him to attend to what specifically was happening to each part when an organism learned something new. This level of attention to behavior is evident in a description of an experiment in which a hungry white rat learned how to solve a "problem box" in order to get to food. The stimulus of the food released the following "random movements" or reflexes, which over the course of repeated trials gradually formed into habits:

Running rapidly and walking slowly from place to place; sniffing, sneezing, washing the face or body; touching constantly the sides of the restraining cage and the box with vibrissae or bare snout, feed, etc.; clinging to all of the objects, sometimes with head up and sometimes with head down; crawling on the ceiling of the restraining cage; butting the nose into the crevices of the wire; gnawing at the wire and at all of the wooden parts; pushing with great force against the box....These movements are repeated over and over again with ever varying order. Finally, however, the order is such that the food is obtained....At the fourteenth trial the time is reduced to .11 min. (Behavior 191)

This passage reflects the dance of habit formation at work. A complex series of behaviors unique to the rat reveal its initial set of bodily habits, which, driven by the stimulus of the food, gradually become more and more reformed by that particular goal. After repetition of the same
procedure, the rat develops new habits, measurable in the shrinking amount of time it takes for it
to solve the "problem box" by acquiring food. The behaviorists hoped that this method of
breaking down such complex systems into their simpler parts would eventually allow for
"complete predictability, both of stimulus and response" (53) – and indeed, with the animal
experiments they were able to achieve a fair amount of success.

But predictability was not an end in itself; it was interesting to behaviorists only insofar as it
could eventually lead to their ability to direct habit formation, not just in animals but in humans
as well. In a follow-up article to "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It," Watson makes clear
that his interest in behaviorist methods ultimately resides in the manipulation of human habits:
"what we seek to have psychology busy herself with is just this matter of environmental
adjustment; what can man do apart from his training; what can he be trained to do and what are
the best methods for training; and finally, how, when the varied systems of instincts and habits
have sufficiently developed, can we arrange the conditions for calling out appropriate action
upon demand" ("Scope" 336)? Behaviorism is interested in habit because it provides the
fundamental ground for control: "by the means of habit formation [the behaviorist] finds the
most direct way of controlling animal activity" (Behavior 45). Since insofar as their nervous
structures could allow it, organisms could apparently form almost any habit through training, the
possibilities for behaviorist intervention seemed vast.

In Watson’s later academic work, conducted solely with human infants, he wanted to prove that
the “gut,” as he preferred to call it, could be conditioned much like the striped or voluntary
muscles – through habit. “Since the gut cannot be legislated out of existence or repressed to
ineffectiveness…why can’t we train it or have it trained to behave in an orderly way, like the

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2 There is some question about what “control” means for Watson. Before 1913, all Watson's research had been done
with animal subjects, where "control" meant experimental control - i.e., not allowing external factors to influence
results. After 1916, all of his experiments were conducted on humans. In "Watson in 1913," Franz Samelson
speculates that Watson simply got tired of animal experimentation and the painstaking gathering of evidence via
fieldwork - paraphrasing Watson, Samelson states that "[Watson] welcomed the conditioned reflex because...it
simplified greatly the tortuous procedures he had developed for his initial work" (14). Essentially, Samelson, argues,
Watson wasn't initially working from a grand scheme of social control - much of his later explanation of his work
seems to have been added as an afterthought. Samelson argues that the actual emphasis on social control doesn't
come until 1916, with the publication of Watson's textbook Behaviorism. Samelson also speculates that Watson
might have thought more seriously about social (as opposed to experimental) control after hearing John Dewey's
1916 APA address "The Need for Social Psychology," which "linked social control and behaviorism to a
'progressive' environmentalism" (7).
way the rest of our body behaves” (Ways 60)? With his work on “thousands of babies,” Watson isolated what he argued were the three fundamental human emotions or “unconditioned responses”: fear, which came from the “unconditioned stimulus” of either a sudden loss of support or a loud noise; rage, caused by the deliberate hampering of motion; and love, which Watson argued was evoked through the stroking of the skin and “sensitive organs.” In all of human experience, Watson argued, these were the only unconditioned stimuli and responses. All other emotional habits – from fears of the dark, snakes, or even objects that would be considered neutral by most, to unhealthy attachments to mothers – were conditioned into humans by their environments, and as such could theoretically be unconditioned. Watson’s attempts to scientifically prove his theory found their apotheosis in “Little Albert,” the experiment – however flawed – for which he is the most famous. In the experiment, Watson banged a steel bar behind an infant who was playing with a rabbit. The infant, startled by the loud noise, stiffened, began to cry, and crawled away. After this was repeated several times, the infant would cry when shown the rabbit – and, eventually, anything that was white and fuzzy. Watson used this and other experiments as proof that emotional behavior was a product of the same kind of conditioning process as the voluntary muscles with which habits were more traditionally developed, through practice. And because humans were less aware of the conditioning that went on vis-à-vis our emotions, this kind of conditioning was far more powerful.

Habit in the behaviorist program would thus initially seem to enable the most familiar fantasy of modernist subjection (and the one most commonly attributed to behaviorists) – that of the pliable subject of medical and scientific authority. The habit formation of the behaviorist subject could, in the behaviorist’s fantasy, be perfectly predicted and controlled: all it would take is for the behaviorist to know and understand the environmental conditions that would trigger the behavior. Thus, by learning to manipulate the environment in order to call out the behavior, the behaviorist could exert control over the subject. Not coincidentally, such a subject also would appear to be an ideal capitalist subject – his needs and desires perfectly revealed in his behavior, which would respond to and eventually be molded by the capitalist forces of advertising and
marketing. Such a fantasy is still reflected with measurable degrees of success today in such formulations as “retail anthropology” (described by Malcolm Gladwell as “the science of shopping”) where, after sometimes thousands of hours spent observing customers’ behaviors and movements through stores via film and literal “tracking,” consultants tell store owners how to rearrange the physical environment of stores (displays, pathways, shelf height, product placement, etc.) in order to maximize purchasing behavior. An even better realization of this behaviorist capitalist fantasy is realized on the Internet, through things like Amazon’s X customer software, with its suggestive based on prior purchasing and searching behaviors. And incipient technologies like neural marketing anticipate the eventual thrust of behaviorism: the more perfect prediction of consumer behavior by bypassing observable bodily habits and going straight to habit at the level of physiological responses.

**Habit as Forgetting**

However, to accept Watson’s overt account of the ideal behaviorist subject – one that can be perfectly predicted, manipulated, and controlled – is to ignore another, more interesting account that exists alongside it, one that apparently undermines the first even as it solves its impasses – and, more importantly, predicts a form of subjectivity considered to be ideal for late capitalism. Habit is also central to this competing form of behaviorist subjectivity; but paradoxically, it is less concerned with the formation of habits in response to stimuli presented by a controlling entity (whether the behaviorist or the advertiser) than it is with memory – specifically, the subject’s capacity to *forget or overcome* habits.

Memory in the behaviorist lexicon was not a decay of some innate faculty of consciousness, but was rather embodied in physical habits; hence, changes in memory involved a reorganization of bodily systems. A professional tennis player who suddenly changed careers in order to become a blacksmith, for instance, would undergo a change of bodily habits so radical that eventually he would forget what it meant to be a tennis player:

> The pounding of the iron on the anvil with the heavy sledge hammer calls for the use of other combinations…of those same muscles used in playing tennis. Blacksmithing
thickens the muscles and sets and stiffens them. It hardens the tendons. They lose their flexibility and suppleness. Age helps in the hardening process. Is it any wonder that two years of blacksmithing totally unfit him for playing the delicate game of tennis? His whole body organization has become different. (“Memory” 247)

What we would now call changes in identity (from tennis player to blacksmith) are driven by changes in physical behavior and habits; in the behaviorist reformulation, memory is no longer to be understood as an internal faculty related to consciousness; rather, memory is this process of literal, physical change of habits. By adopting the physical habits of a blacksmith, the tennis player literally forgets how to be a tennis player. Though he may still be able to talk about game strategies and the finer points of swinging and serving, until he can physically demonstrate his skills on the court, the blacksmith has for all intents and purposes lost his memory of tennis.

Watson’s reformulation of memory is important not only because it was for him another blow at the introspectionist focus on consciousness, but also because it ultimately is the central problem of behaviorism. While Watson overtly desired perfect predictability for the purposes of control, he also claimed behaviorism’s raison d’être as helping organisms, both human and animal, to drop old habits and adopt new ones in response to new environmental stimuli: “There must be complete mastery of simple habits – a readiness to respond to a difficulty and complex environmental setting in a variety of different ways – the ability to change responses ever so slightly to meet the slightest change in a heretofore well known object” (Behavior 49). In other words, the critical thing for a well-adjusted organism was its ability to respond to new circumstances. Watson attempted to reproduce organisms’ ability to drop old habits and form new ones experimentally – in one experiment with white rats, for instance, he changed the lengths of the walls in a maze that rats in prior experiments had already learned to run. Watson reported that while at first the animals would bump into the newly extended walls, because they had previously developed the habit of running mazes, they were able to quickly adjust: “As soon…as the failure occurred, the old chain broke and the new habit was formed” (Behavior 49).

Although Watson insisted in his writings that man and beast were both subject to the same laws of habit formation, humans proved to be somewhat less capable than white rats of dropping old
habits in order to respond to environmental changes, though. As he wrote, “Probably more adults…suffer vicissitudes in family life and in business activities because of poor and insufficient visceral habits than through the lack of technique and skill in manual and verbal accomplishments” (Behaviorism 9). This inability to drop “poor and insufficient visceral habits” was a marker of reduced emotional health. Unhealthy individuals had difficulty dropping or reorganizing their habits; they clung to organizational habits that had ceased to be of service when the environment or situation in which those habits were formed had disappeared.

Watson blamed the strong early connection with various institutions – the earliest and most devastating (from his point of view) being that of the family. Watson found the most pervasive unhealthiness in the legacy of childhood emotional habits: “The mass of organization we are allowed to carry over from our home life is one of the most tragic things in our makeup” (“Memory” 247). Ways of habitual response learned by a child before it “puts on verbal habits” (245) were especially dangerous; these meant that the grown adult could not verbalize his visceral responses, and so their negative effects were allowed to go unexamined. In effect, Watson argued, these old emotional habits kept the adult individual in a state of “infantilism”: “We weep when our feelings are hurt just the way we wept when our mothers scolded us. We sulk or weep when someone fails to greet us cordially and say ‘nice fellow,’ just as we sulked or wept when our fathers failed to say ‘nice boy’ when we performed for him” (247).

In his later, post-academic writings, Watson’s call for perfectly integrated individuals was repeated on a much larger (albeit less experimentally rigorous) scale. As with so many other Progressive-era scientific endeavors, (and as Watson had indicated in the “behaviorist manifesto” of 1913), the interest of the behaviorist program was ultimately social engineering, and hence much of Watson’s later writing was directed at critiquing institutions that in his perception trapped individuals in old unhealthy habits. One unpublished manuscript called “The Behaviorist’s Utopia” reveals most concisely Watson’s social vision, the centerpiece of which was to break individuals’ emotional ties to social institutions that kept them in a state of infantilism. The problems with these institutions are revealed most clearly in the poor mental and emotional health of the individuals who participated in them, especially those who grew up in

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3 A version of this was later published as “Should a Child Have More Than One Mother?” (Liberty, June 29, 1929 pp131-135).
places other than hard-working rural areas (where presumably one is too busy to develop unhealthy attachments). Hence, Watson asked,

If you could start the world over again, how would you change it? Would you have churches and clergymen, law and punishment? Would you have schools and colleges? Would you keep the institution of marriage – one wife to a husband each faithful to the other? Would you keep the home as we have it – allowing parents to own and possess their own children and be responsible for their upbringing? (1)

The solution to these problems and the foundation for his Utopia, Watson argued, was to break individuals’ ties to all institutions. In the behaviorist Utopia, there would be no religion or philosophy, since according to Watson “Religion excuses failure and weakness. It encourages resignation, laziness, and efficiency, and has since religions began” (11), hence keeping individuals in a state of unhealthy dependency. His Utopia would also include no prisons, since psychological malfunction would be seen as either a problem of training (and hence the community’s fault) or of physiological malfunction, both of which could be treated scientifically. Nor would there be colleges or universities; instead, girls would learn “all the arts and sciences connected with the home” (along with “special instructions in the art of interesting and handling men”), and boys would become apprentices to “science, medicine, manufacturing, architecture, mining, agriculture” according to their talents and interests, and they would pass immediately from apprenticeship into their vocation or industry.

But the institution that would be most methodically destroyed in Watson’s Utopia was the family. Since very few in the contemporary home could be considered happy and well adjusted, Watson argued – neither children, who displayed an inordinate amount of behavior problems, nor married couples, who were disturbed by sexual “restlessness” (which also could be traced back to poor parental training) – the best thing would be to “[let] parent-child identity go by the board,” and to “give up our rock-ribbed idea of possessing our own children” (5). The behaviorist Utopia as Watson imagined it would be “a country about the size of the state of Texas containing slightly less than ten million souls” (7), divided into units of 260 households.
Each household would consist of a (monogamous) husband and wife and three children, but no mother would know the identity of her child. When a child was born, it would be taken immediately from its mother and placed in one of the households. Every four weeks, the child would be transferred to another household, until it had lived in all 260 – by which point, it would be twenty and “[sent] out to earn his living unaided” (8). The behaviorist utopia is thus organized around systematically disrupting the negative effects of emotional attachment – what for Watson found its first and most devastating guise as “mother love.” The benefits of this system, Watson argued, would primarily lie in the fact that no individual would be in a place long enough to develop maternal “fixations,” dependency, or jealousy. He argued, “There is no soil in Utopia upon which ‘possession’ of one person by another can thrive. Hence invalidism (a device by which a lazy, whining, complaining child or adult can control the behavior of others with profit to himself) is never seen” (9).

While it is easy to be horrified at what can clearly be seen as a fascist vision of scientific control – Watson built into his Behaviorist Utopia a goodly amount of surveillance, misogyny, eugenics, and control over life and death by physicians and psychologists – what is most interesting about the manuscript is the kind of subjectivity that it envisions. People raised in this Utopia are above all good workers – cheerful, free of “emotional dependency.” Their state of mind frees them up mostly for good service. The evidence of the kind of subject that Watson saw as the ultimate goal of behaviorism can be seen in his description of children playing in Utopia:

Today a six year old and a four year old in Utopia dug for four hours on the foundation of a play house. There was never a quarrel. They did not even glance around when a dog came near them. They were absorbed in their activity. They literally were what they were doing. Automobiles passed in the street, people went to and fro – nothing was seen or heard by them.

This complete absorption in activity is the keynote of the happiness of our children – it is our definition of behavioristic happiness. (16, emphasis in original) “With inhabitants like these,” Watson concluded, “it is no wonder that we feel no need for that abstract entity we call the State” (18).
Elsewhere, Watson described in greater physiological detail the kind of ideal behaviorist subject that was the goal of behaviorism. Contrary to the typical habit-ridden, institution-bound subjects were what Watson called “perfectly integrated individuals.” Such individuals were marked by their ability to forget old, outmoded habits and adapt new ones with the arrival of new circumstances:

In a perfectly integrated individual, the following events happen: As soon as a situation begins to call for the dominance of a certain habit system, the whole body begins to unlock: the tensions in every set of striped and unstriped muscles not to be used in the immediately forthcoming action are released so as to free all of the striped and unstriped muscles and glands of the body for the habit system now needed. Only the one habit system, the operation of which is called for, can work at the maximum efficiency. [cite]

As with the white rats in Watson’s early experiments that quickly adjusted to changes in the mazes they had already become habituated to running, the most critical skill of “perfectly integrated individuals” was the ability to abandon or “unlock” old habits; to drop previous behaviors and develop new ones in response to a change in environmental conditions. The ability to respond to changes in circumstances requires not only the ability to forget old habits at the physical (voluntary and involuntary muscular) level, but also a capacity for attunement to the novelty of a situation – the fact that something in one’s environment has changed that calls for or demands a different sort of response.

At first glance, Watson’s description of the “perfectly integrated individual” seems remarkably contemporary – after all, much of contemporary social theory lauds the notion of attunement to circumstance as an ethical stance [find stuff to support this – Doyle?]. But in the context of Watson’s other work – especially in the various speeches and writings he did in his post-academia capacity as the Vice President of the J. Walter Thompson advertising company – it becomes clearer that perfectly integrated individuals might otherwise be viewed as perfect consumers. Freeing people from the cumbersome habits developed through their attachments to institutions like church, state, and family made them available for a different kind of economy – namely, that of the forces of the consumer economy. As the historian Kerry Buckley notes, assessing the real goal of radical behaviorism as it came to fruition through Watson,
The modern child would soon learn that real authority lay not in the family but in the marketplace and in its supporting social institutions. Achieving success depended upon internalizing the values of the corporate order. Success itself came more and more to be seen as the ability to emulate a style of living defined and exemplified by mass advertising. (143)

Watson’s attempts to retool the connection between individuals and the market is recognizable on one level as part of the behaviorist program of control.

However, such a capacity for attunement is also one of the traits demanded of contemporary workers in post-industrial capitalism. Watson’s habit-adjusting white rats and Utopia denizens alike recall other, more contemporary rodents that are famous (or infamous) in the corporate lexicon: the mice of the New Economy business advice fable Who Moved My Cheese? The best-selling business book of all time (22 million copies sold in 37 different languages), Who Moved My Cheese? tells a story about two mice and two “littlepeople” who live in a maze off of a hunk of cheese. When the cheese is suddenly moved one day by unknown forces, the mice (unhampered by overanalysis or complicating thoughts) run off to look for more cheese, and eventually find an even bigger piece. In other words, these mice are able to drop their old habits (which here are tightly bound up with expectations) and develop new ones in response to the changes in their situation. Their foils, the “littlepeople,” worry and think and rationalize that more cheese will eventually come. When it doesn’t, eventually they learn the lesson that they need to accept change: “The biggest inhibitor to change lies within yourself, and nothing gets better until you change” (Johnson).