

ARE FOXALL'S INTENTIONS GOOD?

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ABSTRACT: Foxall's argument that behavioristic and intentional approaches should be hybridized rests on his views about the inability of a behavioristic position to deal with several features of behavior, including its continuity through time. My commentary suggests that Foxall's reservations about the inadequacies of a behavioristic position are overstated. A behavioristic approach can incorporate many of the features of behavior said to embody intention. However, the radical-behavioristic approach to the continuity of behavior through time is highly unconventional, permitting provisional temporal gaps in cause-effect sequences.

Key words: radical behaviorism, intention, mnemonic causation, incipient behavior, causation

Foxall's interesting and thoughtful treatise (Foxall, 2007) is based to some extent on the view that Skinner's radical behaviorism does not provide an account, or at least a reasonable one, of the role of intentions, beliefs, and desires in explaining human behavior. I disagree, and I believe that the disagreement occurs because my understanding of Skinner's views differs from Foxall's. An important basis for Foxall's argument for the need to adopt his "super-personal cognitive psychology" perspective is his view that Skinner's radical behaviorism has nothing to say about those activities that are said to embody intention. Because that argument is an important part of the foundation underlying his overall position, I shall focus my short commentary on it.

Foxall relies on several examples to illustrate the supposed weaknesses of Skinner's perspective. I shall attempt to present alternative interpretations for several of them. In one example, Foxall notes (p. 5) that the statement "She said that the train would be late" does not imply necessarily that she said "The train will be late." That distinction makes perfect sense in Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior (Skinner, 1957). Perhaps one of the most important aspects of Skinner's approach is that the meaning of utterances is not fixed in the words or other features (e.g., intonations) of them. How one reacts to an utterance is a product of one's experiences with utterances that include some or all of the features of the one just heard. That is, understanding of speech is similar to its production in that different forms can have the same meaning, and the same forms can have different meanings, depending on the controlling variables, where the controlling variables consist of the confluence of a complex learning history and the current

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circumstances. Just because such episodes are amazingly complexly determined does not mean that, in principle, they cannot be understood in behavioral terms.

This last point underscores a difference in my understanding of radical behaviorism and Foxall's. He asserts that radical behaviorism is strictly extensional, using only referentially transparent statements. I do not see that to be the case, a principal counterexample being the notion of an operant, which is a clearly theoretical entity. An operant class contains instances, presumably, that have never occurred previously and may never occur. Similarly, utterances never heard previously can have the same meaning as more familiar ones.

Another point of clear disagreement lies in what Foxall argues stands as explanation from a radical behavioristic perspective. He says “. . .it holds that when the environmental stimuli that control behavior have been identified, the behavior has been explained” (p. 6). My understanding of radical behaviorism leads me to believe that this statement is not correct because it implies that if I can identify the discriminative stimuli and other setting conditions (e.g., motivation) for some act, I have explained it. I spend hours in classes reminding students that it is not correct to think of discriminative stimuli, or conditional stimuli, as causes of behavior. Discriminative control is not an explanation. The explanation lies in the history that established the stimulus control. One of the main goals of behavior analysis is to understand the details and essential features of such histories.

Presumably, Foxall agrees that the things he calls beliefs and desires result from, or at least can result from, particular experiences or aggregations of experiences. Behavioral manifestations of desires and beliefs (as well articulated by Dennett) can prove very useful in predicting subsequent behavior, and Skinner also frequently noted their utility. That does not move them, however, into the realm of pragmatically useful explanations. Only if we change beliefs, desires, or intentions can we alter subsequent behavior, and such changes are wrought by experience (in most cases; a particularly thorny instance is one in which one, by letting both his/her speaker's and listener's repertoires interact, “changes one's mind,” but I contend that, too, is experience-driven).

I was especially confused by Foxall's assertion (p. 11) that behaviorists assume that a psychological sentence expressed in the first person is identical in content and method of verification to the corresponding third-person sentence. That certainly does not comport with my reading of Skinner's 1945 (Skinner, 1945) treatise on how one can learn to emit verbal behavior apparently under the control of private stimuli. Skinner's view is essentially identical to that offered by Wittgenstein, and neither would argue, I would venture, that what controls a personal description of a felt state are the same stimuli used by a verbal community in providing experience that allows the person to say anything at all about it. There is good evidence, of course, that publicly observable aspects of behavior and situation can influence what a person says she feels (e.g., Schacter & Singer, 1962), but no one argues that this exhausts the possible controlling stimuli.

A particularly telling example provided by Foxall helps illustrate our differing understandings of what a radical behaviorist view entails when he presents Malcolm's critique of Skinner's approach to statements such as “I am about to go

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home.” Malcolm and Foxall argue that such statements cannot be under the stimulus control of any particular sensed private state. I believe Skinner would agree. Such instances are covered extensively in *Verbal Behavior*, including instances in which verbal behavior is controlled by the variables responsible for incipient verbal behavior. That is to say, Skinner certainly has a view about such instances, so it is not ignored in his analysis. The position is that behavior is sensitive to the concatenation of variables that have led to certain actions in the past. In the specific case of “I am about to go home” or the less definitive “I feel like going home,” Skinner’s view was that verbal behavior of that sort was under the control of variables that have been present when one actually goes home. One does not have to be “conscious” of the variables that control operant behavior for those variables to exert influence. That is, one does not have to be responding to any particular private event (or constellation of events) to say “I am about to go home.”

In partial defense of his view of the inadequacy of radical behaviorism in addressing putative intentional actions, Foxall raises the problem of “continuity of behavior.” In doing so, he touches on a feature of radical behaviorism that I believe is the greatest impediment to its wider acceptance as a reasonable approach to behavioral science. Logically it is quite clear—and no one disagrees—that the fact that when yesterday’s experience influences today’s behavior it means that the person has been changed, and it is that change that permits previous experience to exert its effects across continuous time. A radical behavioristic approach, only recently developed in the history of thought about behavior, takes a position that is at odds with traditional ways of viewing behavior. That tradition requires temporally contiguous causation, and (I would argue) it is the basis for the past 3000 years’ worth of mentalistic accounts of behavior. On that view, behavior cannot come from nowhere, so it must have immediate prior causes. What are those causes? They are assumed to be either directly felt states of the body (private events) that are sensed just before the behavior occurs, or they are unsensed beliefs, intentions, desires, schemas, representations, attitudes, habits, decisions, moods, defenses, ideas, wants, impulses, personality characteristics, filters, comparators, parallel processors, interests, conflicts, memories, etc. that have the convenient property of occurring or being present immediately before the visible behavior occurs. Radical behaviorism, in contrast, takes a completely unconventional view, the view that causes and effects can be usefully considered to be temporally separated. The view is, therefore, clearly at odds with everyday accounts of behavior and causation, and in some sense they are pretty hard to accept. Bertrand Russell (Russell, 1924) coined the expression “mnemic causation” to distinguish it from everyday conceptions of temporally contiguous causation. As Foxall notes, a radical behaviorist is content to wait for research in neurophysiology (presumably) to characterize the changes that bridge the temporal gap between experience and later behavior—that is, to wait for direct understanding of what Dennett would seemingly relegate to the sub-personal level. As Skinner himself said, “The physiologist of the future will tell us all that can be known about what is happening inside the behaving organism. His account will be

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an important advance over a behavioral analysis” (Skinner, 1974, p. 215). Foxall—and most theorists of behavior—are apparently reluctant to wait, and so they search for placeholders for the physiological changes that provide continuity. Radical behaviorists, mindful that (as any good engineer will tell you) you cannot deduce the inner workings of a device by observing input–output relations (cf. Uttal, 1997), are willing to wait.

There is precedent for mnemonic causation serving the cause of science well—specifically, Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection in its original incarnation. Current life forms, in that view, are the result of natural selection that has occurred over millennia, and much research in biology is still informed by that view. Not present in Darwin’s original formulation was any mechanism or placeholder for the physical features of organisms that transmitted the changes through time. Interestingly, the view specifically removed the idea of purpose or intention from the origin and continuity of species. Later, when the “modern synthesis” occurred, a physical mechanism was identified that could carry the process over continuous time.

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