

BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS, COMMON SENSE, AND LOGIC: REPLY TO BARNES-HOLMES

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ABSTRACT: Barnes-Holmes characterizes his views as a-ontological, not antirealist. My criticisms still apply. Barnes-Holmes has not given any good reason to accept antirealism, nor has he given any good reason to accept an a-ontological position. Because his views, a-ontological or otherwise, are contradicted by ubiquitous aspects of the theory and practice of behavior analysis, these views should be rejected until supported by new and better arguments.

Key words: realism, logic, behavior analysis

In my paper *Antirealist Arguments in Behavior Analysis* (this issue), I criticized some antirealist claims made on behalf of “behavioral pragmatism” (e.g., Barnes-Holmes, 2000) and “contextualism” (e.g., Hayes, 1988). Here the realism/antirealism debate concerned the independent existence, or inexistence, of perceptible and measurable physical objects. It is apparent from my writing that I spent a great deal of time examining *arguments* against realism in the sense defined above. If choices among philosophical options are to be based on more than whim or personal tastes, then surely arguments are what one should be looking for. The papers by Barnes and Roche (1994, 1997) that I discussed are among the few to present *arguments* in favor of “behavioral pragmatism,” and thus are worth examining.

Barnes-Holmes (this issue) suspects that in this examination I am not a neutral party and that I actually want to promote realism about physical objects. He is right. My strategy embodies the uncontroversial principle that when some theorists make bizarre claims (for example, that the earth is flat, or that the world exists only in behavior) and do not provide any good reason to endorse them, then we should *not* endorse them. The practice of behavior analysis is unintelligible in the absence of realist assumptions about perceptible objects and their physical properties (see below). In the absence of good arguments to the contrary, therefore, views that depart from this commonsensical realism should be rejected. Notice that not all bizarre claims should be rejected (indeed, science has its share of them)—only bizarre claims unsupported by sound arguments.

In the articles I criticized, Barnes and Roche (1994, 1997) advanced a number of bizarre claims, for example that “there can be no stimuli (i.e., a physical

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universe) if there is no organism to provide responses that define those stimuli” (1994, p. 165); that “the fundamental nature of the universe (or reality) exists as a behavioral event” (p. 167); and that “*the universe can only ever exist in behavior*” (pp. 167-168). Through clarification and counterexamples, I showed these claims to be unfounded and the accompanying arguments to be unsound.

Barnes-Holmes now asserts that the views I criticized were not his. According to Barnes-Holmes, the claims I quoted *seemed* antirealist when taken out of context, but in fact they weren’t. They were merely a-ontological or non-realist. The conceptual density of the 1994 publication made it prone to misunderstandings; Barnes and Roche wrote one thing, but perhaps they should have written another. Their analyses were not supposed to be final truths, and their ontological talk carried no ontological weight. Finally, Barnes-Holmes marshalls quotations that are a-ontological rather than antirealist (e.g., Barnes & Roche, 1997, p. 547).

Barnes-Holmes is right about his additional quotations but wrong about those I criticized. The statement of Barnes and Roche (1994) that “there can be no stimuli (i.e., a physical universe) if there is no organism to provide responses that define those stimuli” (p. 165), for example, deals with ontology and not epistemology (as Barnes and Roche erroneously wrote, and as Barnes-Holmes erroneously maintains). Switching from “stimuli” to “*known* stimuli,” as Barnes-Holmes suggests, would convert the ontological claim about stimuli into an epistemological one, but only at the cost of making the remainder of Barnes and Roche’s statement (about the *physical universe*, not just “stimuli” or even “known stimuli”) even more confused than it was. And, of course, the content of one’s claims cannot change by adding the caveat that they are provisional—that they should be judged by their consequences, or recommending an open mind.

But enough. Let us assume, for the sake of the debate, that Barnes and Roche (1994, 1997) never made any antirealist claim and that all of their statements were merely a-ontological. Barnes-Holmes’ a-ontological views clash with common sense. They are as disconnected from actual theory and practice in behavior analysis as antirealism would be, and he gives no sound argument in their favor. Barnes-Holmes also misrepresents behavior analysis when he alludes to the neutrality of the discipline with respect to realism. The notion of knowing as behaving is neutral in the debate, as I showed and as Barnes-Holmes now seems to agree; but other aspects of behavior analysis are *not* neutral and they favor realism. These aspects range from the realist assumptions of most behavior analysts (a fact acknowledged by Barnes and Roche, 1994, p. 165) to the specification of stimuli through actual, physical measurements. In response, Barnes-Holmes dismisses the behavior analysts’ ubiquitous ontological discourse (which includes the Methods and Results sections of every empirical paper published in the field) as mere “talk,” and the measurements as irrelevant (see his footnote 3). The ubiquity of realism in behavior analysis does not *settle* the issue or prove that realism should be adopted, of course, but it does show that it is Barnes-Holmes who needs to give arguments in favor of his position.

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I looked into his commentary for sound arguments and did not find any. Barnes-Holmes keeps alluding to a possible “contradiction” or “paradox” that was somehow uncovered by Barnes and Roche (1994, 1997) and then solved thanks to his a-ontological position. One central point of my paper, of course, is that the “paradox” is an invention based on faulty logic; Barnes-Holmes’ a-ontological views do not solve any paradox because there is none.

Barnes-Holmes also maintains that behavior-analytic concepts (such as the concept of tact) are “purely functional” and have no ontological import. His thesis is false if these concepts are taken at face value. Skinner’s (1957) theory of verbal behavior, for example, presupposes the existence of stimuli to control verbal responses and the existence of a social community that maintains the controlling relations. Barnes-Holmes can abstain from such assumptions by choosing *not* to take behavior-analytic concepts at face value, but again it is his choice, not the default commonsensical option, that is in need of defense.

In the example of the traffic light (in which Barnes and Roche assumed that there was one red light before concluding that “in a sense” there were two) Barnes-Holmes asserts that his analysis was not ontological but “technical.” I can only suppose that we have different standards of technicality. He repeats that the “ontological existence” of a stimulus such as a red light is irrelevant to behavior analysis and that what matters is the discriminative function. As I pointed out and as Barnes-Holmes himself explains, however, in order to study the discriminative functions of a stimulus one needs to *manipulate* the latter, and a stimulus that doesn’t exist cannot be manipulated.

As a justification for his a-ontological position, Barnes-Holmes suggests that behavior-analytic concepts would retain their established usefulness if the universe turned out to be a dream or a gigantic computer program (“the Matrix”). In fact behavior-analytic concepts would be useless (we could not use them to modify anyone’s behavior, for example, since by hypothesis we would be asleep or paralyzed); they would only *seem* useful. Be that as it may, Barnes-Holmes’ scenario assumes the representative theory of perception and begs the question of direct realism by identifying experience with an internal surrogate of the environment (so that the environment could be destroyed while leaving the experience intact). If direct realism is true, however, the universe *cannot* be a dream or a Matrix, and Barnes-Holmes’ argument fails (also see Putnam, 1981).

Barnes-Holmes then tries to counter my criticisms by finding them “mentalistic.” The ground for this surprising accusation is that I use terms such as “refer,” “reference,” or “know,” which have no technical status in behavior analysis. When discussing philosophical statements (as distinct from *explaining* behavior) I indeed use such terms, just as Barnes-Holmes does. Here is a partial list from his own commentary: “epistemology,” “argument,” “view,” “purpose,” “goal,” “value,” “reasons,” “concepts,” “knowledge,” “known,” and “refer” (“I am assuming that E and B refer to these terms”). As far as knowing E or B was concerned, my argument was not the tautology that stimuli could be known directly if they could be known directly. Rather, my argument was that stimuli could be known directly while knowing consisted of behaving. In short, my

argument established the consistency of direct realism with a behavioral theory of knowledge, a consistency that Barnes-Holmes (2003, p. 148) had previously and explicitly denied; in making my case, I obviously had to use the term “know.”

In the final part of his commentary, Barnes-Holmes emphasizes that Barnes and Roche (1994) offered more than one choice. He fails to mention that all choices except one were described as contradictory or at odds with behavior analysis. He points out that his views depend on the current context (as if they could fail to do so) and that strategies may or may not work. His paper ends with recommendations to abandon the philosophical debate that Barnes and Roche chose to enter with flawed arguments, to side-step the controversy that behavioral pragmatists themselves started, and to develop a psychology of various scientific beliefs. However interesting, the latter project does not absolve “behavioral pragmatists” from giving sound arguments in favor of their a-ontological stance. Barnes-Holmes gives none.

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