

PRIVATE EVENTS AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE MENTAL: COMMENTS ON MOORE

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Moore's (2001) recent paper, "On Psychological Terms that Appeal to the Mental," describes a number of important differences between philosophical or systematic positions identified with the term, *behaviorism*. Specifically, Moore (2001) emphasizes the differences between the radical behaviorism of the field of behavior analysis and some other varieties of behaviorism on the issue of private events. The purpose of this commentary is to look briefly at some of the issues and implications of Moore's descriptions.

A few brief comments about the term *behaviorism* may be in order. In the published writings and conference presentations of behavior analysts it appears to be increasingly common practice to describe behavior-analytic work as the product of "behaviorists," or as "behaviorism." Part of the problem with such characterizations is the ambiguity of the term. Many distinctive varieties of "behaviorism" have been identified over the years. A partial listing by name would include classical or Watsonian behaviorism, mediational neobehaviorism, methodological behaviorism, logical or philosophical behaviorism, and radical behaviorism (e.g., Day, 1983; Hergenhahn, 1997; Moore, 1995), as well as other varieties such as Kantor's interbehavioral psychology and Staats' scientific (or paradigmatic) behaviorism. To make matters even more complicated, there have been distinctive variations within such classes as mediational neobehaviorism, such as Tolman's "purposive" behaviorism and Hull's stimulus-response behavior theory (e.g., Hergenhahn, 1997). Further, some types of behaviorism span systematic developments, as when the strategic scientific practices of methodological behaviorism enabled the transformation of mediational neobehaviorism into cognitive psychology (e.g., Moore, 1995).

A larger problem for behavior analysts identifying themselves as "behaviorists" is that for most psychologists and philosophers, the term is not ambiguous at all; it describes a systematic position with which they are quite familiar, and against which they stand with strong convictions and long list of battle-hardened arguments. As Moore's (2001) paper indicates, most educated listeners or readers will take "the behaviorist" to be one who will attempt to cash out any and all ordinary-language talk of the "mental" entirely in terms of publicly-observable phenomena. That this is not how Skinner's radical behaviorism has addressed appeals to the "mental" is a central theme of Moore's

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(2001) paper, and the position clearly requires a good deal of explanation and clarification beyond the label, “behaviorist.” A more representative, if unwieldy, label would be the term, “radical behaviorist,” although this would normally require a good deal of further explanation as well. Moore’s (2001) use of the term “behavior analysis” (or “behavior analytic”) to describe a “viewpoint” nicely illustrates the convenience of identifying the systematic position with the scientific field itself.

Skinner, Private Events, and Mentalism

As Moore (2001) describes, Skinner’s treatment of the language of the “mental” involves, in part, the role of private events in the control of verbal behavior (e.g., Skinner, 1945, 1953). The relationship between the various concepts can give rise to a confusion about Skinner’s position. The confusion runs as follows: first, although Skinner has, on a few occasions, strayed into ontological issues, such as denying the existence of a separate world of the mental (an issue to be brought up below), Skinner’s most frequent and detailed characterizations and criticisms of mentalism involve pragmatic concerns. That is, if mentalism is the practice of taking internal events or states, whether theoretical or phenomenological, as *causes* of behavior, then the mentalistic analysis has placed the causes out of reach of practical, effective action (e.g., Skinner, 1953, 1987).

Second, although Skinner may certainly be described as a thoroughgoing materialist, virtually all contemporary cognitivist psychologists and “cognitive scientists” may be described as materialists as well (e.g., Gardner, 1985). That is, contemporary cognitivists do not use the term “mental” to refer to a nonphysical dimension of the mind, but rather to complex properties of the material (and scientifically respectable) world. To oversimplify a complex and diverse set of usages, the “cognitive” dimensions of the natural world involve the world’s “symbolic” functions, such as “information,” and is construed as every bit as physical as the software in your computer. What this means is that cognitivists differ from Skinner and other radical behaviorists in that cognitivists take the presumed internal processes of their theories to be the causes of the sorts of behaviors they study and measure in the laboratory.

A confusion can now occur when Skinner describes the ways in which private events enter into the control of verbal behavior (e.g., Skinner, 1945, 1953, 1957). That is, if “private events” can be construed as internal events, and if these events are taken to enter into the “control” of behavior, then in what possible sense is Skinner not a cognitivist or mentalist, as described above?

The solution begins with recognizing that for the radical behaviorist, terms such as “cause” and “control” have no metaphysical implications, but rather simply refer to observed relations (e.g., Leigland, 1998). Private events, as Moore (2001) indicates, may enter into one kind of “controlling” relation or influence, but the term “cause” is not applied in this case, as the private events merely participate in a complex network of historical and contextual (including biological) variables. In the explanatory practices of radical behaviorism, it is to these latter classes of

variables that the term “cause” is characteristically applied, as these are the types of variables, when interacting with individual organism as a whole, that are most likely to afford or enable the often-cited pragmatic goals of “prediction and control” and “effective action” with respect to behavior.

Escaping the Language Game of Ontology

Among behavior analysts interested in radical behaviorism and systematic issues, it is generally (but by no means in every case) thought that it is a good thing to avoid ontological issues, questions, and controversies. This is because such issues and questions are a needless and wasteful distraction from the business of science. A number of areas within philosophy itself have produced effective arguments that many of the traditional issues of ontology, epistemology, and the like have outlived their usefulness in philosophy and are inherently incapable of any useful progress or resolution, and may thus be gainfully discarded (e.g., Rorty, 1979).

Within philosophy, pragmatism has been one of the perspectives that has advocated a reevaluation of much of the traditional Western philosophical agenda (e.g., Murphy, 1990). Although there are variations within the pragmatic philosophical tradition, contemporary representatives such as Richard Rorty (e.g., Rorty, 1979, 1989, 1991) have described the relevance of its antifoundationalist and antirepresentationalist perspective to the dismantling of such traditional philosophical distinctions as the distinction between mind and body, between appearance and reality, and between language and fact.

In the literature of behavior analysis, a number of writers have described strong relations between philosophical pragmatism and radical behaviorism (e.g., Day, 1980, 1983; Hayes & Brownstein, 1986; Schneider, 1997). Recently, Leigland (1999) has detailed a number of similarities between Rorty’s pragmatism and Skinner’s radical behaviorism. Moore (2001) illustrates the general connection with the following: “For behavior analysis, then, dichotomies between subjective and objective, knower and known, or observer and agent imply, at most, unique access to a part of the world, rather than dichotomous ontologies” (p. 169).

The pragmatic strategy may be applied to other areas of Moore’s paper as well. For example, in the latter part of his paper, Moore (2001) offers the following:

As noted earlier, if there is no mental dimension, there obviously can be no causal mental phenomena that occasion the talk. (p. 179)

The problem is that there is no mental dimension, and psychologists who think that they are talking about events in it and securing an adequate explanation are making a grave mistake, because their verbal behavior is not controlled by events in the mental dimension. (p. 182)

In this alternative statement, the mental dimension is rejected because when individuals talk of mental phenomena, individuals are not actually talking about phenomena from another dimension at all. (p. 193)

The problem with framing such statements in such terms is that they directly engage an ontological position by asserting which properties of nature exist or not. Such engagements set the occasion for various metaphysical counterarguments, which, from either the pragmatic or scientific point of view, are pointless.

To say that pragmatism (and radical behaviorism; e.g., Leigland, 1999) is antirepresentationalist is to acknowledge the “physical world” (or at least the “one world;” Skinner, 1945), but to question whether it makes sense to say that minds, languages, or particular vocabularies are capable of more or less accurately representing that world. No vocabulary is “closer” to reality than any other; rather, there are different vocabularies to suit different human goals. On such a pragmatic view, the scientific technical vocabularies of physics or behavior analysis, for example, are not described in terms of foundations, reality in and of itself, or what phenomena “really are” so to speak, but rather are viewed instead as particularly effective ways of describing, explaining, and working when there is a specific interest in prediction and control (and to say that such vocabularies are so effective *because* they are “real” or “true” is hopelessly circular, for there are no independent criteria for assessing such characteristics; e.g., Rorty, 1991). Thus, ontological issues and arguments are turned into issues of verbal behavior, and other issues of environment-behavior interaction (see also chap. 18, “Logical and Scientific Verbal Behavior,” Skinner, 1957).

In applying such a view to the above statements, behavior analysts need not deny the existence of a mental dimension. They can instead show how such questions are quite beside the point. The vocabulary of the mental is useful enough in ordinary-language discourse, but scientific technical vocabularies have a special function in human culture, enabling highly effective discriminated and differentiated behavior in specific contexts where the contingencies may be described in the general terms of prediction and control.

Conclusion: The Question of Research

Behavior analysis is, after all, a scientific field, and so the question arises as to how such issues of the vocabulary of the “mental,” private events, and so on, might be addressed through empirical research. As difficult as such topics undoubtedly are, some programmatic proposals have been made, such as Place’s (1993) “A Radical Behaviorist Methodology for the Empirical Investigation of Private Events.”

An early proposal may be found in Skinner’s landmark 1945 paper, “The Operational Analysis of Psychological Terms,” in which ordinary-language “subjective” or “mentalistic” terms might be analyzed in terms of the conditions and contingencies which control their occurrence as properties of verbal behavior. Skinner’s (1945) certainty of the ultimate success of such a program was offset by his contention that the project was primarily of historical interest only.

The functional analysis of mentalistic or psychological terms has been advocated and explored since that time (e.g., Leigland, 1989, 1996), and the empirical question relates to a question raised by Moore (2001): “. . . an important question is, how far can one extend the interpretation that subjective terms really refer to publicly observable phenomena?” (p. 168). That is, while the role of private events cannot be underestimated in understanding the radical behaviorist position on the vocabulary of the mental (see also Leigland, 1996), particularly when addressing the first-person case (Day, 1992), Skinner’s program should be useful in identifying other classes of variables that enter into the control of the language of the mental. While the verdict is still out on the viability of such an empirical program, given various methodological and other complexities, the functional analysis of psychological terms represents a possible point of contact between the empirical research interests of the field of behavior analysis, and the mentalistic verbal practices of the larger verbal community.

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