ABSTRACT: Rakover has thought about the nature of explanation for a long time and he has written some insightful pieces on the possibility of incorporating mentalistic language into serious explanations of our activities. Here he takes an extreme tack and grounds his arguments on the oldest of all chestnuts, the mind/body problem. Ironically, as an undergraduate he may have misinterpreted the words of his favorite professor so as to lead him to agonize for decades over the proper interpretation of private experience [for him it’s “mentalistic”]. This has ultimately led to this article, proposing a Multi-Explanation Framework that mixes what he calls “mentalistic” and “mechanistic” elements in behavioral sequences, incorporating a Mentalistic Purposive Explanation Scheme that has the virtue, in his eyes, of adding what “radical behaviorism” lacks. The reader is left with the impression that the explanations produced using this framework would seem more satisfying only because the vocabulary involved is the one we learned as children, and that their usefulness would be no more than that of the folk psychology that has always prevailed. Rakover and many others confuse radical behaviorism with behavior analysis, which leads to tiresome and pointless critiques of the former.

Key words: mind/body problem, mentalism, science, folk psychology, radical behaviorism

How can anyone spend even a second puzzling over the Mind/Body Problem? The Mind/Body Problem! That topic could only be important to a writer who is unmindful of the history of serious thought and who is guided largely by introductory texts, folk psychology, and the works of philosophers writing for popular audiences. I didn’t think that Rakover fit that description, yet here we are. The Mind/Body problem is a phony and I must wonder why Rakover doesn’t dither and worry over the more general question of existence? At least that’s a real question. But I don’t want to hear about that either.

The Mind/Body Problem: Really?

The mind/body problem is indeed Rakover’s concern here and it’s the reason that he begins with the list of quotations by writers of popular works who correctly note, admit, and lament that we don’t understand how the brain produces mental stuff or what we might call “the way it feels to exist.” William James offered a
longer and more completely-argued list of mind/body lamenters in 1890, particularly in his Chapter 5, and the same discussion persists even now, when the public is becoming persuaded that cognitive neuroscience and the fMRI have the brain all figured out. But Staddon (2001) correctly observed that “. . .three decades of increasingly well-supported research into the psychology and neurobiology of human mental life have come up almost empty” (p. 180).

Who can bear hearing another word on the subject or waste another twenty seconds of life enduring more whining about the “made-up” physical/mental gap? Rakover even cites Plato [Plato?] as authority! Who else cites Plato as a philosopher, particularly after he has been, as William James put it in describing attacks on Fechner, smitten hip and thigh and not a stick of him standing—demolished, even by me (Malone, 1997)? Of course, Rakover also appeals for backing from folk psychology and introductory psychology textbooks, so Plato may be authoritative by comparison. One wonders why Rakover can’t just settle for a dose of intentionality, as his obscurantist mates have done, and leave metaphysical questions to metaphysicians.¹

Rakover, Intentionality, and Radical Behaviorism

Intentionality is a useful word when applied to the epistemology of Aristotle or to the definition of “mental” offered by Brentano. Modern writers use it for different and less laudable reasons. For example, Foxall (2007) could seem to the casual skimmer/reader to make the same general arguments that Rakover makes here and that others, like Daniel Dennett, have made so frequently. To their credit, they don’t usually burden us with their thoughts on the mind/body issue as Rakover does, and there’s the difference. Those writers and dozens more like them fuzzily understand radical behaviorism, at least well enough to appreciate what Skinner (1945) meant in “The Operational Analysis of Psychological Terms” and in About Behaviorism. But they all mistakenly believe that radical behaviorism “leaves out” something and that pasting “intentionality” onto their version of radical behaviorism will fill the void that they feel; one could say that it returns “purpose” to their lives. In what way are they so mistaken? What is radical behaviorism and does it omit something important? I insert a lesson explaining radical behaviorism, since it’s apparently a difficult doctrine to grasp and since B. F. Skinner himself contributed to the widespread confusion about it.

What is Radical Behaviorism?

Radical behaviorism is the important view that intervening variables don’t explain anything, though their use is common in everyday conversation. Hunger, aggressiveness, intelligence, memory, happiness, purpose, intention, belief, will,
and at least 16,000 other intervening variables\(^2\) denote concepts that only provide names for phenomena that need explanation themselves. Their frequent use as names leads inevitably to their reification, so that researchers have sought brain mechanisms underlying hunger, intelligence, ambition, and other entities that are actually only words. *They’re only words!* But, as the psychologist/satirist Peter Killeen (2007) wrote in a discussion of Foxall (2007), we seem to take the position that “If it works, reify it...” (p. 95), so we do. The understanding of our behavior, including all of psychology, does not require fictional underlying causes. Intentionality and other intervening variables are thus anathema, yet nothing is “left out” or denied or ignored by radical behaviorism (as one of many examples, see Moore, 2008, for a thorough account).

What of the mind/body “problem?” Specifically, how does radical behaviorism explain our “rich and beautiful conscious experience,” like that occurring in the appreciation of cock fighting, tractor pulls, country music, and the Jerry Springer show? Aren’t all of these objects of our attention sensed, processed, brain-juggled, and made conscious by the awe-inspiring power of our “minds?” How does the gooey wet mess that is our brain do that?

That’s the phony “problem” that radical behaviorism solved by showing what all of the metaphysical monists through history have shown. That is, that the mind/body problem is phony (bogus, artificial, contrived, fictitious, and even meretricious). Skinner (1945) pointed out the obvious—the real distinction lies in “private” versus “public,” not in mind versus body. His arguments for the advantages in recognizing this truth have never been answered in any convincing way, and most educated people accept it today, as they have for many centuries (see Malone, 2009, Ch. 17).

This simple doctrine has hugely important implications and Skinner presented hundreds of pages promoting it, often going far beyond his facts, as Staddon has shown (e.g., 2001), as well as doing some downright damage. In his ceaseless attempts to promote his personal celebrity, he muddied up the lovely principles of radical behaviorism by linking it to a less-lovely movement that was easier for popular audiences to grasp. I have suggested many times that Skinner’s most serious error was in writing in such a way as to lead readers to believe that radical behaviorism requires behavior analysis as its application and that operant theory is behavior analysis.\(^3\) I have noted the unfortunate equating of radical behaviorism and applied behavior analysis in print at least a dozen times, from 1975 to 2009. The French psychologist, Francois Tonneau, has made the same argument more eloquently (e.g., 2007). Tonneau and I agree that Skinner’s popular writings have led to frequent misunderstandings and consequent criticisms of radical

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\(^2\) See the list of trait names collected by Allport and Odbert (1935). Intervening variables are simply conceptual expressions, words that refer to relations among sets of independent and dependent variables.

\(^3\) Though he made clear (e.g., 1945) that radical behaviorism was independent of particular theories, including reinforcement theory.
behaviorism that really apply only to behavior analysis. Happily, some current philosophers (e.g., Noë, 2009) and comparative psychologists (Barrett, 2011, 2012) have come to clearly understand radical behaviorism. Louise Barrett, in particular, has been heroic in her efforts to educate others in comparative psychology. But for most, misunderstanding still rules.

Radical Behaviorism is Not Applied Behavior Analysis

So Rakover, Foxall, Dennett, and many others are bound to confuse radical behaviorism, a philosophical/methodological view, with the vast field of behavior analysis. However, behavior analysis is almost wholly a profession, where the jargon of “mands,” “tacts,” “reinforcers,” “operants,” “discriminative stimuli,” “the three-term contingency,” and a few related terms constitute the entire theoretical knowledge base of thousands of practitioners. Behavior analysts are very seldom radical behaviorists, and I have found it difficult or impossible to explain radical behaviorism to them. Behavior analysis as nonapplied research and theory has only just begun trying to explain behavior (e.g., Malone, 2009; Rachlin, 2004), and Skinner’s (1938) “convenient formulation” that relies solely on operant terms has probably outlived its usefulness, as Skinner agreed (Malone, 1999).

Their profound misunderstanding leads Rakover, cognitivists, and philosophers of mind to conclude that radical behaviorism provides an unsatisfying account—something is left out—especially when private experience and actions occurring over time are considered. Hence, they propose some kind of “intentional” language or “will/belief” as a supplement to what they view as radical behaviorism. Perhaps all that is missing are a few words. As Hocutt (2007) put it, referring to this specific issue, “. . .intentionality is merely linguistic. . .” (p. 92), or, as Foxall (2007) wrote, “The difference between intentionalistic explanation and that which characterizes radical behaviorism is a difference between the sentences employed to express them” (p. 50). No, that is not true. Intentionality is irrelevant to radical behaviorism and, if it were even applied to reinforcement theory, it would constitute a horrific “dumbing down.”

Surprisingly, Rakover wants even more than a linguistic alteration and a grafting on of intentionality. He argues here for the legitimacy of Will/ Belief “mentalistic” (spooky) explanations as a supplement to “mechanistic” explanations and that is far worse than grafting “intentionality/purpose” onto our accounts. Rakover’s proposal is far more radical and, from the viewpoint of radical behaviorism, absolutely unforgivable. There are better ways of dealing with his mentalistics. But here’s what he wants.

Returning to the Explanations of Childhood

Many years ago a young Sam Rakover may have misinterpreted a revered Professor, Y. Liebowitz, who claimed that only he could feel his own toothache.

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4 Often the criticisms apply only to applied behavior analysis.
and thus psychology is not part of the natural sciences. Those words could mean many things, but Rakover, in his epiphany, interpreted it to mean that private experience (in this case, what I call “the feeling of existence”) is not part of the natural world and so science must “pass over it in silence,” to paraphrase Galileo. Professor Liebowitz may have meant no more than that and simply agreed with those of us who believe that the description and analysis of our subjective experiences are best left to the humanities. Who would disagree? Wilhelm Wundt reminded us that most of what we call psychology must be treated by Völkerpsychologie, the study of cultures and their histories, including their arts, law, language, and the rest—it’s not Naturwissenschaft. But Rakover was convinced that Liebowitz was arguing for the metaphysical dualism of mind and body—and maybe he was. Even if that’s exactly what he meant, the privacy of his toothache was no warrant for that conclusion; it only meant that part of our experience is not readily shared with others. What’s relevant is that it set young Rakover on a decades-long quest to incorporate some scary stuff into reasonable discourse.

**Rakover’s Reprise of Mary Shelley’s Model**

Shelley’s “Adam” was protagonist of a horror story, a creature constructed of parts of different people that horrified its creator once it was completed. Its animation owed to inspiration from writings of Erasmus Darwin. Rakover’s creature rivals Shelley’s and both are composites of parts that nature had not meant to be joined. Rakover’s monster may be the more disturbing since it comprises both natural and supernatural parts and is inspired by the mind/body myth.

**Rakover and the Mind/Body Dualism Error**

Rakover believes strongly in the Mind/Body distinction and can’t imagine that anyone could dispute it—this despite the authority of the Milesians and Eleatics, Protagoras, Aristotle, Hume, Herbart, Fechner, Helmholtz, Peirce, Wundt, Dewey, James, Holt, Titchener, and many others, all metaphysical monists, as well as all radical behaviorists and educated people in general. Religion aside, where did the mind/body myth begin? Plato followed Pythagoras in assuming mind/body dualism and, since that machine/ghost dichotomy was easy for children to grasp and necessary for religion, it was carried through the centuries despite the objections of Aristotle and many others. The Mind/Body issue is popular grist and not a proper problem at all, but Rakover believes otherwise. Mental and physical, mind and brain are real divisions for him and mentalistic entities should form a part of scientific explanations, or so he claims. How can that be accomplished, and why, oh why, should it be done? It’s not just a case of “mere words” for Rakover.

5 Who, in that way, became one of the great villains in the history of psychology.

6 Though some were epistemological dualists, like Fechner and Titchener, for example.
What are Rakover’s “Mental States?”

Rakover gives no definitions of the mentalistic terms that he uses such as will, belief, thought, feelings, and images, though even folk terms need some sort of definition other than “everyone knows what (e.g.) ‘will’ is.” “Consciousness” might be an umbrella term for Rakover, and he seems to construe that as a “Casper the Ghost” sort of entity that always has been posited by primitive peoples, theologians, motivational speakers, and romantics. Sometimes “mental” seems to mean “consciousness” for Rakover. For example, he suggests on p. 24 that the Müller-Lyer illusion is effective even if one knows that it is an illusion, so he proposes that it is not subject to “mentalistic” explanation. That suggests that “mental” must be “conscious,” though that conclusion seems contradicted elsewhere in his text. Operational definitions of folk psychology terms are hard to come by, which is why they are called by that name!

Science as “Mechanistic”

Rakover believes that there are only two kinds of explanation, “mentalistic” and “mechanistic.” We’ve seen that the former must include all kinds of stuff related to Will/Belief. His “mechanistic” division refers to science, and to me that could include everything from Thales through Newton, Lavoisier, Darwin, Planck, and John Hughlings Jackson’s epigenesis. Mechanistic is a really awful adjective, particularly for science since the nineteenth century. And when most psychologists and philosophers refer to “science” they mean whatever memories they have of high school or college physics, chemistry, and biology. But modern physics is not really “mechanistic” and Rakover must know that living things don’t really operate mechanically, in the sense that a flashlight does. Living materials, including muscles in David’s arm when he waves to Ruth, show the amazing property of “irritability,” not to mention “life,” which is even more useful and mysterious than Casper the Ghost. Ask Aristotle why he coined the word “organic.”

Yipes: Radical Behaviorism is Mechanistic?

Radical behaviorism is a complete mystery to Rakover. For example, he thinks that it involves the three-term contingency, which he views as a (mechanistic) “stimulus-response-consequence” unit that could as well apply to Clark Hull’s truly mechanistic behaviorism. To call radical behaviorism “mechanistic” is not simply wrong, it is so profoundly untrue that “it’s not even wrong.” Radical behaviorism is not behavior analysis or reinforcement theory and they are not mechanistic in any event. Oh, my goodness.

7 It requires only “mechanistic” explanation in his scheme.
Rakover’s Multi-Explanation Framework

Should the Language of Folk Psychology be Legitimized?

Folk psychology already rules our daily lives and needs no argument for legitimacy; it has always been the chief mode of explanation in all societies. And everyone knows, as a bit of folk knowledge, that folk psychology is often wrong and that it often causes trouble. Nonetheless, Rakover wants to legitimize such common parlance as a means of explanation and he claims that such “mentalistic-laced” explanations can be scientific, just like what he calls mechanistic explanations. He argues that our activity can be divided into parts somehow and that we can make up [invent, concoct] mentalistic explanations for parts that seem appropriate. This will make our explanations more satisfying since we will recognize the words that our parents used to explain things to us as children. The best part is that the “mentalistic” parts need not correspond to “conscious” parts, according to Rakover. Readers are left to come up with examples that don’t involve David driving to Tel Aviv to meet Ruth or dogs who figure out elevator doors.

I can’t think of any cases that really benefit from the Multi-Explanation Framework, but it makes me want to require everyone to read and reread E. B. Holt’s work, for example his (1915) The Freudian Wish and its Place in Ethics as a prophylactic against proposals like Rakover’s. It accounts for David’s trips to Tel Aviv better than does Rakover’s method. Francois Tonneau (e.g., 2004) offers an excellent modern treatment of Holt’s main ideas. However, for many readers Hugo Munsterberg’s advice may be more understandable since it is simpler and it still allows us to use the explanations of folk psychology.

A Better Rôle for Folk Psychology

Munsterberg’s Causal and Purposive Psychology

I think that Rakover will fail to convince many folks that folk psychology can be dressed up as science, and most will agree that it should be kept separate. Many writers have formally proposed such a separation, but one deserves special mention because of the thoroughness of his treatment of the issue. This was the student and critic of Wundt, Hugo Munsterberg, who took over the Harvard laboratories after William James and who published a delightful book in 1914 that I see as an improvement over Rakover’s solution to the mentalistic/mechanistic dilemma. Munsterberg titled his book Psychology: General and Applied and urged that there are two kinds of psychology, “causal” and “purposive,” and both are of value but they must remain separate, as must science and religion. Causal psychology is scientific, much like Wundt’s “Naturwissenschaft,” though Munsterberg favored practical causal application much more than did Wundt. Purposive psychology is Rakover’s “mentalistic/purposive” psychology, where the will is free and we have, as givens, understanding, aesthetics, love, faith, learning, memory, and other objects of folk psychology. Oddly, though Rakover has published previous iterations describing the ideas he presents here, he has never cited Munsterberg.
The Monty Python Model of Science

When someone proposes “requirements for scientific explanations” I either snicker or yawn—in either case I stop paying attention and I know that the proposer is not a practicing scientist. The Vienna Circle’s attempt to show that Logical Positivism can lay out the “scientific method” was a wholly autistic enterprise that served to occupy them and a small following of pedants for a few years. It portrayed science as a stuﬂying exercise in following impossible rules that no real scientist ever followed and that no working scientist ever gave a fig about. Start with “objective (pure and unbiased) observations,” misinterpret Francis Bacon, and go on from there. Aside from ﬁlling a few pages in introductory textbooks, Logical Positivist prescriptions about science sind tot und begraben. Let’s hope that a stake was driven through the heart.

But wait, Rakover attempts to show/convince us that Will/Belief explanations, “which are widespread in folk psychology. . .meet requirements for scientiﬁc explanations.” Horror of horrors, I sense Austrians ignoring Peirce, yet announcing criteria for meaningful statements and “requirements,” listed to demarcate science from nonscience. But it’s Rakover deﬁning science so that he can show that mentalistic spookiness is just as scientiﬁc as high school physics. And David is heading for Tel Aviv again just as my patience has run out, my brain is signaling “low battery,” and my IQ has dipped to “seek remediation online” levels.

And yes, Rakover features his favorite and only human example, “David drove to Tel Aviv because he wanted to meet Ruth and believed that driving there would realize his will.” Does that statement meet the criteria, deﬁnitions, requirements, hallmarks, and whatever of science? What are the supposed requirements? Do these characteristics suﬃce to deﬁne science? Have a look.

**General Procedure:** Propose an explanation for speciﬁc phenomena (David waves his hand to bid Ruth farewell—a speciﬁc case of will/belief).

**Rationality [deduction, logic...]:** it makes sense to wave—he wishes to bid farewell, believes that a wave will do it, so it makes sense to wave.

**Empirical Conﬁrmation:** Can David pick Ruth’s photo out of ten? Does Ruth say she saw the wave? (I think that I am starting to see it.)

**Empirical Irrelevance:** The deductive/nomological—hypothetico/deductive method is not refutable, though speciﬁc hypotheses are. (What?)

As for the last criterion, of course a method is not refutable An adult who really wants to understand and explain behavior would have to ﬁnd that David’s history occurred in a culture that taught him to use various customary signals when approaching or leaving an acquaintance—a hand wave, for example. What does it add to say that he had the “will” to bid farewell and the “belief” that a wave would fulﬁll his “drive,” which derives from his “will,” so that all this led to the mechanistic raising and waving of his hand, which was followed by Ruth’s return wave and conﬁrmation to David that his Will/Belief/Drive apparatus was “fulﬁlled.” The utility of this criterial approach and the entire multi-explanatory model eludes me.
Most Behavior is Without Purpose, Goals, Will, or Belief

As a final thought, I refer the reader to the work of Edwin R. Guthrie (e.g., 1935), a philosopher/mathematician/psychologist who argued that assuming that all of our activity is goal-directed is a gigantic error. We can see this if we simply observe everyday activity as he did. From the “purpose is inherent” viewpoint most of what we do are errors! I think that he was right and that intentionality/purpose, will/belief, and other purposive terms aren’t fundamental aspects of what we do, whether they are construed as mentalistic or just descriptive; they are ways that we categorize because we impute rationality where none exists.

References

