THE ESCAPE OF METAPHYSICS: COMMENTARY ON BURGOS (2015)

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As the Walrus entreated, Burgos (2015) talks of many things, and quite brilliantly, but essentially he has presented a clear, careful, and scholarly argument that radical behaviorism has typically conflated “mentalism” and “dualism.” If this be the case—and in some senses I think Burgos is correct—then maybe radical behaviorism has weakened its philosophical position in claiming to be foundational to a natural science of behavior. However, as much as I might side with Burgos’ conclusion, I find his approach strange, as reflected in his words, “…ontological (metaphysical), not epistemological…or linguistic matters…” (p. 4). While he admits the importance of the latter two, they “…will be peripheral to my discussion.” But in important ways by choosing this constrained approach he undermines his goal to bring some coherence into the radical behaviorist’s program, and in at least a couple of cases his “treatment” for radical behaviorism is worse than any disease, as I’ll discuss shortly. Certainly one may legitimately play, as Burgos often prefers, a purely rational game on the field of metaphysics, but I argue that the sort of issues at stake here are about what it might mean to talk about a natural science of behavior and that includes what we think we know about behavior and how we talk about it, including the “mental,” not only in fact, but so as to make sense of it. Thus, what Burgos calls the “epistemological” and “linguistic” (I would include the “empirical”) cannot simply be put aside; indeed, they set the initial and boundary conditions on what makes sense to talk of “mind,” “mental causation,” “identity,” “brain-behavior relations,” “agency,” “privacy,” and so on—all issues he treats directly or indirectly.

As for the natural sciences, one may question just why they need an ontology in Burgos’ sense. Yes, the natural sciences, even if typically unstated, do commit to some minimal assumptions, for example, “There is a discoverable order to nature.” But, this is not the expression of some “blind faith” or esoteric metaphysical ideology, but derived from vast and deep experience—the evidence is overwhelming. And most scientists (along with many others) reject Descartes’ immaterial (and immortal) soul or mind for a variety of reasons, many of which cannot be said to be based on metaphysical arguments. In any case, there is no need to debate what is a non-issue. I say this here because all the discussion of
what is or is not “physical, or “material,” and the like is not relevant to radical behaviorists—science and magic are immiscible.

**But Why? Tangled in a Web of Words**

One question not clearly addressed by Burgos is *why* a number of those claiming to be radical behaviorists seemingly equate “mentalism” with “dualism.” The simple answer is that this tack is putatively addressing the same “mistake” made by most people who are asked, say, “Do you possess a mind and, if so, is it different from your body?” Anyone who has ever taught a psychology course will know the overwhelming answer to both such questions will immediately and inevitably be “of course.” This unconsidered answer likely does reflect a pervasive legacy of Descartes, but more importantly, beyond that, a “general disease of thinking” which *seriously* attempts to address such questions as: “What is the mind?”, “How are the mind and the body related?”, “Is the mind identical with the actions of the brain?”, “Am I just a body”, “Are we essentially just brains in a vat?”, “Will we ever understand consciousness?”, and a host of other pernicious metaphysical puzzles that can never be resolved, but only, one hopes, dissolved.

The radical behaviorists Burgos is chastising are seemingly caught in some of the same muddles as those who raise misguided questions like the above. They should know better, because many of the difficulties involve verbal behavior—in other words, what Wittgenstein would refer to as the grammar or use in the language of expressions involving words like “mind,” “mental,” “body,” “brain,” “consciousness,” and the like. There is much to unfold in this context, but I’ll endeavor to be brief. Baum (2005), Moore (2008) and others assert in various guises that the “mind” is a fiction. Presumably, what is being dismissed here is the Descartian “mind as entity” notion, thus identifying the mental with the operation of some immaterial homunculus at the seat of our being. If such were radical behaviorism’s sole concern, then, as championing a science of behavior, this would certainly be consistent and correct. But things don’t end here. There is an attack on “mentalism” from many different quarters as if whatever that entails is some cock-eyed, delusional *theory* of human action. I can do no better than to quote Hacker (2001, p. 67):

> [Human] wants, intentions, and purposes are expressed in their tryings, strivings, and goal-directed behaviour and speech. These are grammatical propositions that characterize human life, and the use of the rich and variegated psychological vocabulary is part of our form of life, not a part of an explanatory theory that might prove false and be rejected. Psychological and neurophysiological theories may come and go, but the propositions that people love and hate, make up their minds, and pursue their aims, have things in mind, are no more theoretical than that white is lighter than black or colours can be seen but not heard.
These essential aspects of human behavior referred to by Hacker, and many others, are facts, not fictions, and the task of a behavioral science is not to dismiss them as wrong-headed, but to incorporate them properly and attempt to understand the controlling variables, including verbal history, that bring them about. I must emphasize that such a task is indeed challenging, but is only made more challenging by getting entangled in conceptual nets. For example, Moore (e.g., 2008) frequently dismisses what he calls mentalism as constituting a different “dimension.” I don’t know what this means—just what “dimension” is supposed to be measured? IQ scores, maybe?!

**Mental Causation: Thinking Can Make It So**

And then there is the issue of “mental causation”—which Burgos recommends radical behaviorists adopt—though in ways apparently restricted to “external” behavior. Contrary to this constraint, at least some radical behaviorists have a ready account for what most would label “mental causation,” namely in their treatment of private events. Indeed, Skinner’s position on private events put the “radical” in radical behaviorism. Here, “mental” is, in part, behavior—covert behavior. (In addition, there are sensory events.) I’m not going to pretend all the problems regarding, for example, “covert” versus “overt” behaviors have been satisfactorily addressed (if even possible), but to deny the role of, say, contemplating, recollecting, day-dreaming, and much of what we call problem solving as activities with causal outcomes would be perverse. Because we spend most of our waking hours in such activities, there are numberless examples. How, for example, would we account for the moves we see in a chess match? Would we say that the players were doing nothing between moves because we saw no overt movements? Perhaps even worse is to assert something like, “We can never know exactly what the players were doing (whatever it is, it’s not “external”), so we must dismiss such ‘private events’ as being improper in a science of behavior.” Moreover, appeals to “history” are largely vacuous because this tactic typically entails far more mystery than, for example, our simply asking what the chess players were thinking before a move.

The need for a natural science of behavior to account for and interpret what are surely essential human functions is obvious and such cannot be addressed by an appeal to ontological metaphysics or to some austere behaviorist ideology (e.g., Rachlin, 2014). Let’s face it, “mind” and “mental” do have proper uses in the language and cannot be dismissed tout court, especially by a behavioral science which claims to be “thoroughgoing.”

**Here’s Another Fine Mess…**

And speaking of appeals to metaphysics, Burgos claims that radical behaviorism might benefit from adopting a “mind-brain identity” stance, as if it did not have enough conceptual challenges. I’m uncertain if Burgos is actually
championing such a view, but his recommending it to radical behaviorists must constitute some kind of endorsement. The arguments showing the absurdity of this notion are legion and while I’m tempted to rehash all the reasons why this metaphysical ideology is nonsense, I’ll confine my remarks to a few points. From a radical behaviorist perspective, a mind-brain identity position would become a behavior-brain identity position, but this would not change all that’s wrong with it. However, this would mean that the so-called identity would be extended to overt (“external”) as well as covert behavior. Thus all our actions, covert and overt, would be identical with brain functions. I need to emphasize here that this is a metaphysical proposition regarding reduction, not a scientific proposal subject to test. As for its incoherence, I quote from a paper on privacy (Marr, 2011, p. 457):

Ontological reduction says, essentially, that all the attributes and actions at one level are identical with those at the reducing level. But what can “identical” mean here? One can speak of identical twins, identical beliefs, or trigonometric identities, but what can it mean to say, for example, that my belief in p is identical with some neural state, q? If you and I both believe that p, does that mean we’re in identical neural states? The criteria for identity of beliefs are surely different from the criteria for identical neural states; to assert otherwise means a person is identical with a part of the person—his brain...Moreover, in what sense can these putative neural states explain our shared belief...We look to our different environment-behavior histories to understand why we believe p, not in our brains...The identity theorist may protest that the identity of, say, expressing a belief and a particular neural state only applies to a given individual, not necessarily to two individuals holding the same belief. But this is an empty claim. If one were unable to make meaningful comparisons between putatively identical behaviors between individuals and their respective neural states, the whole enterprise is scientifically and conceptually vacuous...To assert brain-behavior identity implies brains have beliefs, which is simply nonsense. We might be mistaken in our beliefs, but can a brain be said to make a mistake?...The word, “mistake” has no application to brain activity, and, more generally, “identical” has no application to brain-behavior relations—to assert that it does is a category mistake...Aside from these kinds of problems, an essential question is: What is meant by a “neural state?” Brain function, for example is massively hierarchical with emergent properties at every discernable level, so the notion of a neural state is incoherent in itself. Just what “neural state” is supposed to be identical with a specified behavior? A response like: “Everything going on in the brain when the behavior occurs” is, to say the least, unhelpful.

In the context of reduction, I would add that if minds or behaviors are identical with brain function, then why stop there? Surely brain function must be identical with cellular/biochemical/molecular events, and those in turn to atomic processes, etc., down to strings, perhaps. To my knowledge, no one has yet proposed a “mind-string” identity thesis, but why not? Because that would simply be ridiculous.
If all this weren’t enough, behavior-brain identity violates a basic tenet of radical behaviorism, namely that “behavior” is a holistic concept—a biological function of the whole organism in interaction with its environment. Thus, to identify a function of part of an organism with the actions of the whole organism is nonsense. “My brain solved this differential equation” is just as silly as “My legs walked to my office.”

Speaking of biological function, Burgos says, “In the identity theory, mind qua brain function is not fundamentally different from digestion qua the functioning of the stomach, blood-pumping qua the functioning of the heart, respiration qua the functioning of the lungs, and so on…” This “the brain is the organ of the mind” notion is confused. Digestion, blood-pumping, and respiration are anatomical/physiological/biochemical activities of organs; those activities of the brain include generating electrical signals, secreting and taking up various transmitters and neuro-hormones, forming and eliminating synaptic interactions, and so on—not, say, doing mental arithmetic. Brains are indeed essential participants in doing mental arithmetic, just as, say, stomachs are to digesting a lobster dinner—but would one say that the latter was identical to enjoying a lobster dinner? Part of the confusion here is between a mechanism itself and its potential role in various activities and events. Wings have an essential role in bird flight, but knowing all about wings wouldn’t predict or explain the swallows’ returning to Capistrano.

The Escape from Ideological Behaviorism

Finally, as Burgos knows well, not all who might identify themselves as behaviorists, even radical behaviorists, view mental activity largely as covert behaviors or sensory events. Baum and Rachlin are two “dissenters” among others, and their views are similar (see, e.g. Baum, 2011; Rachlin, 2014; also Marr, 2011 for a discussion of some dissenters). Both adopt the ideology that only overt, observable behavior (and its history) can be considered in a natural science of behavior. Baum simply dismisses mental activity altogether, or, at a minimum, absorbs it into “molar behavior,” while Rachlin absorbs “the mind” into what he calls extended patterns of behavior. Neither would hold with behavior-brain identity. Rachlin is, I think, explicit on this (e.g., pp 119-120), but then executes, to my mind, a strange move. “In essence, talking to oneself is better regarded as part of the mechanism underlying thinking than as thought per se” (2014, p. 127, my italics). Suppose I think to myself, "I must stop by the grocery store today." Is this only part of the mechanism of the thought that I should stop by the grocery store as opposed to the thought per se? Then what is the thought per se? And which part of the mechanism is Rachlin referring to? If I should exclaim out loud to another the same sentence, what is this—both the thought and the mechanism of the thought, since presumably there must be some mechanism (neural?) for my overt expression—are they the same? Surely not. Something extraordinary must happen though when now you can hear me: Some mysterious mechanism has been brought to light that somehow embodied my previously unarticulated thought. But,
according to Rachlin, this only became a thought when you could hear me. Does any of this make sense? Nevertheless, Burgos is recommending “teleological behaviorism” to radical behaviorism as a cogent approach to mental causation. In my view, not only does such a tactic fail to solve any problems, but radical behaviorism would then no longer be radical behaviorism—and what’s left not worth defending.

References

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