ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MENTAL CAUSATION: COMMENTS ON BURGOS’ (2015) “ANTIDUALISM AND ANTIMENTALISM IN RADICAL BEHAVIORISM”

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I agree completely with Burgos’ (2015) argument. I just think he drew the wrong conclusion. I grant that dualism can be treated independently of mental causes—that is, someone could support dualism and not any interaction between the physical and the nonphysical. Such epiphenomenalism seems of limited use in understanding behavior.

Dualism cannot serve any science, and certainly not a science of behavior—behavior analysis. The principal opposition to behaviorism, the philosophy underlying behavior analysis, is not just dualism, but folk psychology. Because of his other contributions, when Descartes put forward a version of folk psychology that was patently incoherent, he was still taken seriously. Thus, Descartes’ dualism—or whatever label one applies to his view of mind and behavior—became a focus of both criticism and emendation. Descartes, however, and all the philosophers and psychologists influenced by his views, were victims of the folk psychology that is built into Indo-European languages like French and English. Folk psychology is the received view; to learn English or French is to learn folk psychology. Few people question it, even though it is obviously incoherent, and it is extremely difficult to escape.

Philosophers respond to the incoherence by redefining troublesome terms like free, real, and mind. Thus, we find not simply free will as people usually use the term, but several varieties of free will, and not simply realism, but several varieties of realism. So, too, with mind, and even in Burgos’s paper we find several views of mind. As Burgos points out, redefinition is altogether too easy and convenient, but what else should philosophers do?

Behaviorists, in contrast, respond to the incoherence in folk psychology either by rejecting the troublesome terms or by interpreting them as they apply to behavior. Thus, mind is either a useless term for understanding behavior or mind is behavior itself. No place exists for a notion of mental causation, if that term is taken literally. To explain, I need first to say something about mental and then something about cause.
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Mentalism

Mentalism is the practice of offering mental events as explanations of behavior. Since mental is the adjectival form of mind, it means “of, in, or pertaining to the mind.” In folk psychology, mind is nonphysical, internal, subjective, and nonbehavioral. Since it is usually located inside the head or the brain, it may not always be thought of as nonspatial, as Descartes claimed for the soul. Instead, mental events are said to take place in the mind, as if it were some kind of space, arena, or theater. Whether to include private events is a matter of some debate. Skinner and others have claimed that private events (i.e., thoughts and feelings) are behavioral, but that position is unsupportable, because private events are unobservable (Baum, 2011). The mental events put forward by folk psychology as causes are things like intentions, desires, beliefs, knowledge, urges, instincts, and so on. Mentalism inevitably entails dualism, but, as Burgos points out, that is not necessarily the main problem with mentalism. The main problem is the impossibility of mental causation.

Burgos’s appeal to the “causal closure of nature”—his Premise 4 (p. 11)—is the crux of his argument. If all causes of physical or natural events are physical or natural, then mental events, being neither physical nor natural, are not causes. The implication, “If x is a cause of any natural event, then x is a natural event,” has the contrapositive, “If x is not a natural event, then it is not a cause of any natural event.” Thus, Burgos’s conclusion that a mental cause is a physical event is incorrect, because, not being a natural event, it is not a cause at all. If a mental event were a cause, it would not be mental, but that is a contradiction. That mental events are not causes holds unless one somehow transforms the mental to the physical. That transformation will generally be impossible or unconvincing (cf. mind-brain identity theory and functionalism as discussed by Burgos), unless one expands the notion of cause and causality.

Causality

Throughout Burgos’s paper, he seems to consider “cause” to mean “efficient cause.” That usage makes some sense, because mentalism usually offers mental causes that are immediately present. When someone says, “I pray because I believe,” they usually seem to be saying that their internal belief in the efficacy of prayer is the immediate (efficient) cause of their praying.

Another view is possible. Traditionally, behavior analysis treated behavior as composed of discrete units. In the laboratory, for example, one studied the lever press (an “operant”; Skinner, 1938, 1969). The conception applied less well to everyday life, although it might be seen in a phrase like “I took a walk.” Instead, one may view behavior as composed of activities that extend in time. In the laboratory, for example, one studies lever pressing. In everyday life, our activities like working, exercising, socializing, and so on, take up 24 hours in a day.

The labels of activities are usually gerunds, rather than simple nouns. One spends time in various activities over the course of a day, a week, a month, or a
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year. No one activity takes up all the time, and they compete for the limited time available (Baum, 1995, 1997, 2002, 2013).

With this view, we treat believing in the efficacy of prayer as an activity. It is extended in time, may increase or decrease, but doesn’t take up all the time available. It is composed of parts like talking of the efficacy of prayer, urging others to pray, planning time for praying, and, of course, praying. These parts of believing are themselves activities, but on a smaller time scale—less extended in time. The activity believing in the efficacy of prayer also is a part of a still more extended activity: believing in God. Because every activity is part of an activity on a larger time scale and is composed of parts that are on a smaller time scale, I call this view of behavior the “multiscale” view (Baum, 2013).

If we think of believing, intending, wanting, knowing, and so on, as extended activities, then in a sense we have converted the mental into the physical, because the activities of believing are observable behavior (Baum, 2005). Believing need not be internal. Indeed, the only way that anyone knows whether they or someone else believes anything is from their behavior. Someone who never prays cannot believe in the efficacy of prayer, no matter what they say.

If we ask how causality enters this picture, we see that efficient causality is not the only type of causality involved. In particular, one may interpret the statement, “I pray because I believe,” as referring to final causality. The praying, being a part, fits into the more extended activity of believing. Thus, praying is an effect of believing as a final cause. Praying exists because believing exists, and believing exists because praying exists. We have avoided the impossible efficient mental causality embedded in folk psychology.

This multiscale view resembles the position of Rachlin (1994, 2014). We may not agree in all points, but the thrust is the same (Simon, 2013). With this move to extended patterns of behavior or activities, we have converted the mental into the behavioral (physical, natural) in a way that at least is more defensible than mind-brain identity theory or functionalism, both of which seem nonsensical to anyone other than philosophers.
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References


Simon, C. (2013). “You can be a behaviorist and still talk about the mind—as long as you don’t put it into a person’s head”: An interview with Howard Rachlin, Ph.D. *Norsk Tidsskrift for Atferdsanalyse, 2*, 1–8.


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