

GEORGE BERKELEY RESURRECTED: A COMMENTARY ON BAUM’S “ONTOLOGY FOR BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS”

Max Hocutt¹
The University of Alabama

Abstract: The following essay is a commentary on those parts of William Baum’s “Ontology for Behavior Analysts” that have to do with realism, which Baum defines as belief in the reality of things independent of perception and rejects on the premise that, since “All we have are perceptions,” distinguishing perceptions from their objects leads to an untenable metaphysical dualism. I show that this claim not only does not follow from Baum’s unintelligible Berkeleyian premise but is factually false. Some realists in the history of philosophy—notably Descartes and Locke—have certainly been dualists, but others (notably Hobbes and Spinoza) have not. As I show, the difference is that the dualists hold that mental activity occurs in a disembodied mind, while the materialists reply that it is the function of a material brain. This difference is obscured by Baum’s undefined talk of separate worlds.

Key words: ontology, realism, dualism, perception, anti-realism, materialism, idealism

Introduction

In his long, wide ranging, and ambitious “Ontology for Behavior Analysis,” Professor William Baum (2017) seeks to persuade his fellow behavioral scientists that their ontology should include “Not Realism, Classes, or Objects, but Individuals and Processes.” As we shall see, however, Professor Baum has a unique style of persuasion. He does not much argue or explain; he declaims and cites authorities. Among his poorly explained claims are the following: (1) Realism understood as belief in the reality of objects that exist independently of being perceived is “disastrous for behavior analysts” because “separating” subject from object inevitably leads to metaphysical dualism, an incoherent assignment of perception and object to different “worlds.” (2) Behavior analysts would therefore do better to adopt (a) the anti-realism of 17th century Irish Bishop George Berkeley, who famously proclaimed “To be is to be perceived,” (b) the mysticism

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.
No ethical approval was required, because no subjects were used.

¹With thanks to Peter Killeen, Jose Burgos, George Graham, and Joe Willingham for helpful comments on earlier drafts. All remaining errors are mine.

of the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which all is one and distinction is illusion, or (c) the pragmatism of William James, who made workability his measure of truth. Then they should read Baum's own work to see how theirs ought to be done.

What part of this am I going to talk about? Since mysticism is, by definition, undiscussable, I shall ignore it. Baum's riffs on individuals, classes and processes are discussable, but they raise questions too technical for a brief essay such as this. So I shall pass by these too. About pragmatism I shall say only very briefly why Charles Peirce preferred his original and paradigmatic version to James' knockoff.² After some brief remarks about ontology, my focus will be by turns on Berkeley and realism. On Berkeley, I will argue that he used the words *exist* and *perception* in ways so deviant that his claims resist not just precise evaluation but simple comprehension. Regarding realism I shall argue that Baum's claims about it are not only confused but unsubstantiated and historically false: There have been dualist realists, but they do not exhaust the tribe. I will end with a short analytic history of the relation between dualist and realist treatments of perception.

Ontology: Does it exist?

Since Baum's topic is ontology (theory of being, reality, or existence), we should begin by observing that it is not the job of philosophers to determine what exists. Doing that is the job of the special sciences, each of which has its own ontology—viz., the entities that its practitioners talk about and study.³ Thus, physicists talk about the motions of physical bodies, biologists about the life of living organisms, behavioral scientists about the behavior of animals, and so on. What philosophers talk about is the logic of the word *exists* and the methods of determining what, if anything, it describes. But everybody has opinions about what exists, and it *is* the self-assigned, if often unwelcome, job of philosophers to evaluate these opinions, not so much by saying whether they are true or false as by

² Peirce saw many problems with James' pragmatism. The main one was James' belief that pragmatism was a method for determining truth. Peirce regarded it as merely a method for defining terms. Second, equated with workability, it varies with the purposes of the user, making it too subjective to be a test of truth. A third problem was James' identification of truth with the verified. Peirce believed that some truths have not yet been verified; we just don't know them. For these reasons and others, he once jestingly offered to re-baptize his pragmatism "*pragmaticism*, a name ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers." (Atkins, n.d.)

³ As Quine observed, we know the ontology of a science or other piece of discourse when we know the values of its bound variables—in other words, the subjects of its predicates; i.e., what is being talked about (Quine, 1953).

saying whether they are logical and sensible; for some ontologies are so obscure they lack even the virtue of being false.

In my philosopher's opinion, the ontology of Baum and his hero Berkeley falls under this last heading. That is why Samuel Johnson, the famous lexicographer, "refuted" Berkeley's ontology ("To be is to be perceived") not by offering verbal arguments against it but by kicking a stone. This was Johnson's way of saying that Berkeley's preposterous statement used the words *exists* and *perceived* in such deviant ways that his claim resisted not only refutation but comprehension. In what immediately follows, I shall try to justify this assessment.

George Berkeley: Did he exist, or was he nothing but perceptions?

My argument is simple: George Berkeley's ontology, which Baum endorses, is a game of "Now you see it; now you don't." When the good bishop said *esse est percipi* ("To be is to be perceived") and argued that mountains, houses, and trees are, therefore, *nothing but perceptions*, not independently existing realities, he took back with one hand what he gave with the other. By declaring that he had perceived mountains, houses, and trees, he implied that these things existed, but when he added that they were nothing but perceptions, he took it back. In workaday English, what it *means* to say that something *exists*, or is *real*, is that it does not go in and out of existence with our "perceptions." That is how phantoms behave, not real things.

Berkeley, who was an ingeniously clever man, had a reply. In his old age he claimed that he never meant what everybody had taken him to mean—viz., that mountains, trees, and houses go out of existence when not perceived, or never come into existence until perceived (Flage, n.d.). Nor, since he was no solipsist, did he mean that he had to perceive these things personally. Other human beings and God could perceive them too; they could even perceive things that you and I do not perceive, or perceive differently what we also perceive. Still, since each perceiver has only his or her own perceptions, there is never anything but perceptions. Berkeley therefore insisted that anyone who declares that a perceived object might exist unperceived is uttering a "contradiction." How can a perceived object be unperceived?

This was clever word-play, but it was fallacious reasoning. One might as well argue that there is a contradiction in saying of a married man that he might someday be unmarried. This would amount to denying that married men can continue to exist when divorced, which is absurd. Unmarried men are common, and so are unperceived objects. In saying so, I am not uttering a dubious

proposition but a simple, obvious, and indisputable truism. That repeating this truism has once again become necessary is an embarrassment to this scientific journal, of which I was once editor.

Radical Empiricism: Do the objects of perception have unperceived material substrates?

Yet Professor Baum makes repetition necessary when he declares “All we have are perceptions” and goes on to illustrate his thesis by claiming that he doesn’t know that his tree is in his yard when *he* is not there. Of course, we must not take him to mean—for he does not exactly say—that the *tree* is not there; only that he doesn’t at that moment *know* that it is there. Why not? On his own thesis, Baum’s tree is nothing but perceptions. If that means anything, it means that he cannot without contradiction suppose that this tree exists when unperceived. Like it or not, he must commit the fallacy of counting absence of evidence as evidence of absence. “I don’t see it” must mean “It does not exist.” Here, Baum’s epistemology is dictating his ontology, as he promised it would.

Like the aged Berkeley, Baum replies that his neighbor can also see his tree. Unlike Berkeley, Baum does not also drag God into the conversation. Instead, he quotes radical empiricist Ernst Mach, who assures him that the “laws of physics” will do what God did for Berkeley—namely watch over his tree when nobody else is around. Also, Baum could have seen it if he had been there. On this basis, the merely possible and counterfactual perceptions of others get counted as perceptions, preserving the preposterous claim that “All is perceptions.” Never mind that Baum is counting his perceptions before they hatch. How does one refute such tightly circular reasoning? One kicks a stone.

The moral of the story is that realism is not a dubious theory but the plain meaning of saying that mountains, trees, and houses are not phantoms but real and enduring things. Pace Baum, this observation applies not merely to *things*, but also to such temporally extended processes as volcanic eruptions and such momentary events as lightning strikes. And, lest we forget, the activity of perceiving is not just passive and sensory, but also active and richly cognitive—i.e., infused with beliefs, theories, concepts, and knowledge. So, we also perceive truths, facts, and states of affairs. Thus, we perceive that the thing is colored red, that the mountain is covered with snow, that the volcanic eruption is violent, that the lightning split the tree in half, and so on. Facts can also be *objects of our perception*, and they too exist, whether or not they are perceived as such. The ontology of perception is capacious, but it is not exhaustive of reality.

Dualist realism: Is there another kind?

Let that be enough about Baum's ontology. I now want to consider his case against realism. As I understand it, that case reduces to the claim that realism must be rejected because it incoherently "separates" perceiving subject from perceived object, placing them in different "worlds."

This frequently repeated but never explained or clearly argued claim seems to me to have two serious problems. For one, it conflates distinguishing things with separating them. Grant that realists *distinguish* perception from its object. In my lexicon that does not constitute *separating* them, much less consigning them to different "worlds," whatever that is supposed to mean. True, if I say that my perception is *inside me* while the thing perceived is *outside of me*, I locate it and its object in disjoint *places*. However, separate *places* are not separate *worlds*. For, to quote Charles Peirce, "Worlds are not as plentiful as blackberries."

That is the first problem; here is the second: When formulating their doctrine, proponents of metaphysical dualism do not talk of *worlds*; they talk of *categories* and say that everything in the world we all live in belongs either to the category of immaterial minds or to the disjoint category of material bodies (Descartes, 1993)⁴. To prove that realism entails *this* precisely formulated thesis, it must be shown that asserting the existence of unperceived bodies is declaring the existence of immaterial minds. Yet Baum never undertakes to demonstrate this. Instead, as if repetition were demonstration, he simply repeats his question-begging belief that realism leads to inner-outer "dualism," which is "incoherent."

Before I address this claim, let me make one thing clear: I have no wish to deny that dualism might be incoherent; a case can be made that it is. According to Descartes, minds lack spatial extension; yet thoughts and perceptions take place in minds. If 'in' means *inside*, this is a patent contradiction. What lacks boundaries cannot contain things. That, simply stated, is the case for incoherence. It is a persuasive case, but it is not conclusive. Read more charitably, Descartes' talk of ideas *in* minds might have been metaphorical, like talk of the characters *in* a novel, not literal, like talk of passengers inside a car. If we may ignore Descartes' remarks on the pineal gland, this reading absolves his dualism of incoherence, although it

⁴ For the authoritative definition of the term *categories*, see Aristotle's little treatise *Categories* (McKeon, 1941 7-39). Roughly stated, categories are of different logical types. Thus, Baum's classes, individuals, and processes are categories.

does not make sense of disembodied minds, the signature concept of metaphysical dualism.

Incoherence now aside, I return to the question whether realists are *necessarily* dualists, as Baum claims. That *some* realists have *in fact* been dualists there can be no doubt. The historical prototypes are Descartes and Locke, both of whom were *realists* in that they believed in the existence of unperceived objects; *dualists* in that they thought these objects belonged to mutually exclusive categories, immaterial minds and material bodies. However, Baum ought not to ignore the fact that some realists have not been dualists but materialists. Here the prototype is Thomas Hobbes, a contemporary of Descartes who denied that immaterial minds exist. In his words, “all is body,” and perceiving is “motions in the brain.” (Hobbes 1982). No dualism there. Nor was there any in the monism of Spinoza, who insisted that minds are not *things* but *modes* of things, which have no existence apart from the things of which they are modes (Spinoza, *Ethics*).

If a more recent counterexample is wanted, add Jose Burgos, who has taken much the same line as Hobbes (Burgos, 2015, 2016). True, Burgos talks, like Descartes and Locke, of “mental” activities, and this has led Baum to accuse him of dualism, but the label is unwarranted. Like Hobbes and Spinoza, Burgos clearly thinks that Descartes was mistaken to attribute mental activities to immaterial and mythical *minds* when they can be understood better by studying the real material *brains* in which they occur. Professor Baum dislikes Burgos’s neurological hypothesis, as Berkeley disliked that of Hobbes. But declaring is not proving, and if Baum hopes to affix the label ‘dualist’ to Burgos, he will need better glue than the opaque metaphors “separating” and “worlds.”

So far, I have argued that, owing to ambiguities in Baum’s argument, he has failed to prove that realists are necessarily dualists. I have also given documentary examples of realists for whom that claim was patently false. I have not addressed Baum’s vague and unexplicated but frequently repeated claim that realism “leads to” or “implies” dualism. That may be so. The claim is too vague to evaluate. The more precise and important question is whether realism *entails* dualism. In other words, does dualism follow logically from realism? I say that it does not. Baum has intimated, but he has not shown, that it does.

Realism: Is it naïve or critical?

The question that remains is why Baum thinks he *has* shown this. My hypothesis is that he has conflated *critical realism*, which is usually dualist, with

naïve realism, which is usually not.⁵ Baum conflates the two when he says that philosophers describe as *naïve realism* what in fact they call *critical realism*, then proceeds to beg the question at issue by using the word ‘realist’ bereft of modifiers to denote all realists, naïve or critical. For reasons that will soon become apparent, critical realists are also called indirect realists, while naïve realists are called direct realists. Both believe that things exist unperceived, but only some believe that the world divides up into immaterial minds and material bodies, the essential claim of metaphysical dualism.

The difference is revealed most strikingly in how dualists understand and talk about perception. According to Locke and Descartes, physical entities are not perceived *directly*; they are perceived *indirectly*, by first perceiving *ideas in one’s mind* and taking these for *representations* of physically external *things* (Locke, 1996). The first formulation of this theory was by the ancient Greek atomist Democritus, who apparently thought that physical objects literally sent off little pictures that became the immediate and direct objects of visual perception by entering the mind of the perceiver through his eyes.

This theory had been forgotten when it was revived and touted as a solution to the puzzle that philosophers called *the problem of error*, the depth and prevalence of which had recently been brought to the attention of thinking men by 17th century scientists. The examples are now common knowledge: Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Boyle, and others had proved beyond reasonable doubt that, despite seemingly well-founded belief to the contrary, the sun stays put while the earth rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun, that so-called solid objects are really more or less densely packed clouds of atoms too small to see with the unaided eye, and that colors are not really on the surfaces of apparently colored things but are ‘in’ the mind or eye of the beholder.

Descartes’ indirect theory of perception, called by some “the way of ideas,” would explain how people had come to make the mistakes that the new scientists had recently exposed: Nobody had actually *seen* the physical things, events, or processes they thought they had seen; instead, they had ‘seen’ images or ideas *in their own minds* and mistaken these for *effects* of things whose real natures were being revealed by the new physical scientists. This explanation did not deny the independent reality of the *things* indirectly perceived. *It did assert the mind-dependence of the “ideas” directly perceived.* So from this theory to metaphysical dualism was but a short step. In fact, that step had already been taken. Descartes

had already adopted mind-body dualism because it supported hope for escape from the death of the mortal body. Many others liked it for the same reason.

It was at this juncture that George Berkeley entered the conversation. Agreeing that we directly perceive *only* the ideas in our minds, he reasoned that we have no perceptual evidence for anything else. Talk of unperceived external objects was therefore empirically meaningless. Grant that saying so meant rejecting the new physics. The chance to discredit it would be lagniappe. The bishop could both reaffirm common sense belief that the sky really is blue and the stove really is hot, just as they are perceived to be, and at the same time undercut the already great but rapidly growing prestige of the new physicists, whose “ungodly materialism” had become a threat to Berkeley’s Christian belief and priestly authority.

Berkeley therefore announced that he could do without theories of the unobserved microstructure of the matter that, according to the physicists, lay under the surfaces of things. God had given us the means of finding our way about the world by enabling us to learn what we need to know without penetrating the observational surface. There was, therefore, no need for unverified theories about occult causes. As it would be stated today, correlational science relating present observations to past and future observations will suffice. All of this followed directly from the Cartesian assertion that we actually perceive not real physical objects but only *the ideas in our own minds*, the truth of which was thought to be clear on introspection.

On the same wind, David Hume took a different tack, one that would later be accepted and developed by Ernst Mach and other *radical empiricists*. Agreeing that we directly perceive only our own “impressions and ideas,” he concluded that scientific talk must be exclusively about our private sensory perceptions. About the physically external world he would be agnostic. However, he soon added that, if faith in an unobservable God was justified, faith in the continued existence of absent things was even better justified. He would therefore say no more about “impressions and ideas,” the topic of the first book of his youthful *Treatise on Human Nature*. Instead, he would go on to write more realistic and better selling books and essays on history, economics, and moral theory.

Fortunately, Thomas Reid, Scottish contemporary of David Hume and philosopher of common sense, had a better idea than either Berkeley or Hume. Contesting the indirect realism of Descartes and Locke, Reid would revive Aristotle’s naive realism and say what most people had believed all along—that we

directly perceive not only our own ideas and perceptions but also physical things, events, processes, and their properties, *just not always accurately or completely* (Reid, 1997). In principle, this condition solved the so-called problem of error, which had all along been a problem of finding words to describe error that did not have the false implications of indirect, representational dualism. Left undone would be the unending task of identifying empirically and experimentally the specific causes of an endless and multiplying variety of errors. But nobody should have tried to complete that task in a single fell swoop anyhow.

By showing that one need not follow a pious Berkeley into the never-never-land of a desperate idealism, or a youthful Hume into the arid desert of radical skepticism, the Reverend Reid had performed a signal service to philosophy. That he was himself a metaphysical dualist is attributable not to the fact that he was a realist but to the fact that, as a Christian, he believed in immortality. The frailties of the body were too evident to leave hope for its continued survival. An immaterial soul was necessary; so, God must have supplied it. As noted earlier, it was also this consideration that had caused Descartes to reject the Aristotelian teachings of his Jesuit masters in favor of the metaphysical dualism of Plato.

Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

Baum's claim that realists cannot avoid being dualists depends on defining the word *dualism* so broadly, loosely, and ambiguously that every distinction is counted as positing metaphysical dualism. No doubt, that is why Baum prefers mysticism, the thesis that *all* distinctions are unreal. However, as just shown here, there is no hint of dualism in direct, non-representational realism.⁶ On the contrary, naïve realism is more at home with some variety of materialism, Hobbesian belief that there are only bodies and that our sensations, thoughts, perceptions, and the like are but "motions in the brain."

Do behaviorists need to concern themselves with the brain? BF Skinner thought not, but the reason was not that he thought the brain irrelevant; it was that the available means of studying it were limited. So he eschewed speculation about the brain for fear it would be talked about in just the way Descartes' talked about the mind. Baum evidently shares this same fear, and with some justification. As

Daniel Dennett has remarked, many psychologists are “Cartesian materialists,” who just declare to be in the brain whatever dualists used to put into the mind, a way of doing science that is too easy to be right (Dennett, 1978).⁷ However, thanks to the work of some 20th century physicists and engineers, we now have amazing new devices—MRI, CT scan, etc.—for observing the brain’s activities and correlating them with, or in some cases identifying them with, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, emotions, decisions, and actions otherwise understood and defined by reference to the behavior that is their normal expression, sign, and symptom. There is no longer any good reason to ignore the brain.

Many have not ignored it. Such neurophysiologists as Michael Gazzaniga, Robert Sapolsky, and Joseph LeDoux have already been busy using these new instruments in a concerted attempt to help us understand how the brain helps us function. Furthermore, they have made considerable progress enlightening us about this. Behavior analysts, to whom credit is due for many remarkable and useful findings relating an animal’s behavior to its environment and history without presupposing the dubious reality of immaterial ‘minds,’ might do well now to begin paying attention to these new scientists of the brain, provided they can shut their ears to mystics who are blocking the path of inquiry irrelevantly yelling, “Beware the Dualist!”

References

- Atkins, A. (n.d.) Charles Peirce: Pragmatism. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Baum, W. M. (2017). Ontology for behavior analysis: Not realism, classes, or objects, but individuals and processes. *Behavior and Philosophy*, 45, 64-78.
- Berkeley, G. (1975). *Philosophical Works; Including the Works on Vision*. M. Ayers (ed.). London: Dent.
- Burgos, J. E. (2015). Antidualism and antimentalism in radical behaviorism. *Behavior and Philosophy*, 43, 1–37.
- Burgos, J. E. (2016). Mentalism versus dualism: Replies to commentaries. *Behavior and Philosophy*, 44, 46–79.
- Dennett, Daniel (1978), *Philosophical Essays on Minds and Psychology*. Bradford Books, Montgomery Vermont.
- Descartes, R. (1993). *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3rd ed. D.A. Cress (tr.) Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana.
- Downing, Lisa, "George Berkeley", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/berkeley/>
- Flage, D.E. (n.d.) George Berkeley (1685-1783). Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁷ One example of this is talk by virtually cognitive scientists of *representations* in the brain. This suggests that there must be a homunculus in the brain to perceive this “representation” and discern its meaning—an idea dangerously close to dualistic talk of disembodied minds.

- Hobbes, Thomas (1982). *Leviathan*. Penguin Classics.
- Locke, John (1996). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. K.P. Windler (ed.). Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana.
- McKeon, R. (1941). ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, "Categories." Random House, NY, 7-39.
- Quine, W.V. (1953). "On what there is" *From a Logical Point of View*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1-20.
- Reid, T. (1997). *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. Edited by Derek R. Brookes. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. (Original work published in 1764.)