INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE: CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES ON BEHAVIOR RESEARCH AND THEORY

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The first Amazonian Symposium on Behavior Research and Theory was held in Belém do Pará, Brazil, in November 2013. The title of the symposium, “100 Years of Behaviorism,” was intended as a celebration of Watson’s 1913 manifesto as well as a call for reflection on the history, present status, and future of behavior analysis. The symposium was organized by Marcus Bentes de Carvalho Neto and myself, and received financial and logistic support from the Federal University of the state of Pará (PROESP/UFPA, PPGTPC/UFPA, NTPC/UFPA). With further help from the local Academic Union for Behavior Analysis (LAAC/UFPA) and the Brazilian Association of Psychology and Behavioral Medicine (ABPMC), the event in Belém was advertised in social media and interest groups related to behavior analysis.

The main idea behind the symposium was to provide an opportunity for open discussion among Brazilian researchers interested in conceptual issues in behavior analysis. Work from these researchers could focus on empirical findings to varying degrees, but the conceptual dimension had to be present to be included in the program. Its final composition obviously depended on who was available at the scheduled dates. Thus, the absence of a given topic (for example: perception; memory; language) from the symposium in no way implies that the topic was deemed unimportant. Based on their contributions to the symposium, five authors sent their manuscript to Behavior and Philosophy for peer review (Jay Moore and I serving as ad hoc editors), and the results constitute this special issue.

In the first article, Marcus Bentes addresses the controversial topic of the relation between radical and methodological behaviorism. Radical behaviorists may be prone to contrast radical and methodological behaviorism, and to dismiss the latter in its entirety. As Bentes argues, however, acknowledging the social nature of science implies that regardless of its stance on private events, behavior analysis remains wedded to a central aspect of methodological behaviorism: its reliance on publicly shared phenomena to evaluate scientific claims. Bentes’ conclusion contradicts some aspects of Skinner’s thinking (although not others). The reader may find it instructive to compare the present argument with a series of exchanges about private events in the Behavior Analyst (2011, Fall, vol. 34).

The next article, by François Tonneau, is both a criticism of radical behaviorism and a sketch of an alternative philosophy of science. I argue that two entirely different issues, the environmentalism of behavior-analytic explanations and their inductive nature, have been conflated in behavior analysis. Once these two issues are seen as distinct, it is possible to develop explanations of behavior that are both hypothetico-deductive and strictly environmental. Doing so, however,
requires the repudiation of Humean views of causation and embracing instead causal primitivism and causal realism about degrees of influence.

The third article, by Diego Zilio, is a careful examination of Skinner’s views on neuroscience and the role of neural events in behavior analysis. To the best of my knowledge, Zilio’s analysis is the most detailed so far (at least in English) and is a model of clarity and scholarship. I trust it will be cited and serve as a central point of reference for future discussions of the topic.

In the fourth article, Emmanuel Tourinho discusses some theoretical implications of recent studies of cultural evolution in the laboratory. These studies involve complex relations among different individual repertoires, their aggregate product, and cultural processes defined at the group level. Although Tourinho’s article is strongly based in empirical findings, the ultimate issue addressed here is that of developing an adequate set of theoretical concepts to deal with cultural evolution—a topic of intense interest in Brazilian psychology departments with a behavior-analytic orientation.

The special issue concludes with João Cláudio Todorov’s take on the evolution and future of behavior analysis. Todorov’s comments reflect years of experience as a researcher and are pregnant with implications for basic and applied behavior analysis. They are also worth comparing to a special issue of the European Journal of Behavior Analysis scheduled for 2014 and that is devoted to the relation between behavior analysis and psychology.

All in all, these articles make for a snapshot of current behavior-analytic thinking in Brazil. Due to various lineages in the behavior-analytic family, the perspectives of the present authors are bound to differ from, but also overlap with, those from other countries. I doubt that the articles published here will command uniform agreement. In being argued for or against, however, I trust they will advance conceptual debate in behavior analysis.