ABSTRACT: Foxall’s incorrect claims about behavior analysis (2007) arise from a failure to understand the stance of behavior analysis. Behavior analysis is the science of behavior; it is about behavior and not about organisms. It views behavioral events as natural events to be explained by other natural events. This view extends to verbal behavior. First-person statements and third-person statements, intentional or otherwise, are instances of behavior to be explained. Behavior analysis explains them by relating them to the history of context and consequences that might have led to their occurrence. Believing in Satan is an extended activity, of which statements about Satan constitute less extended parts; it is an error to suggest that the belief could stand as the efficient cause of its parts. That behavior repeats from time to time is no more mysterious than that other natural events repeat. Even if we do not know the physiological mechanism, filling in the temporal gaps with phony storage and representation is no help. Likewise, control by complex contexts is in no way illuminated by imagining phony processes within the organism.

Foxall’s paper “Intentional Behaviorism” (2007) makes several claims about behaviorism. Were they correct, they would be important criticisms. The most extraordinary claim, in my view, is that behavior analysis cannot “adequately” explain behavior without resorting to intentional terms. Foxall actually calls this a “fact” (p. 2). It is, however, false. I think that this incorrect assertion arises from a failure to appreciate what might be called the “stance” of behavior analysis.

In my book Understanding Behaviorism (Baum, 2005) I point out that, although behaviorists disagree among themselves about many issues, they all agree on one proposition: A science of behavior is possible. That is the core of behaviorism, and the science is usually called behavior analysis. It is not an area within psychology but an alternative to psychology, and although it has some relationship to philosophy of psychology (mainly critical), the philosophy of behavior analysis is behaviorism.

The assertion “A science of behavior is possible” implies, among other things, that behavioral events are natural events, to be understood and explained with the methods of natural science, which include confining explanations and interpretations of phenomena to talk about other natural phenomena. In some
places, Foxall seems to understand this “stance,” but he finally loses touch with it when he suggests that it is “optional” (p. 9) and that introduction of intentional terms is both desirable and necessary. The reasons he gives stem from confusion over the difference between ordinary language concepts and the concept of verbal behavior. He correctly asserts that verbal behavior is treated in the same way as other behavior, but then gets misled by accepting uncritically the views of philosophers like Daniel Dennett and Norman Malcolm about language and reference, which have little—if anything—to do with verbal behavior.

The distinction between first-person statements and third-person statements, of which philosophers make so much, is irrelevant for behavior analysis. If a person says, “I have a headache,” “I am angry,” “I felt like going home,” or “I intended to portray someone getting married,” that is behavior to be explained. If a person says, “She has a headache,” “She is angry,” “She felt like going home,” or “She intended to portray someone getting married,” that is behavior to be explained. To behavior analysis, none of these utterances refers to anything; they are natural events to be explained by other natural events, and none is uncaused, as Foxall suggests about the ones including the first-person “I.” The behavior-analytic approach to explaining or interpreting these events is to talk about the history of context and consequences that might have led to them in the current context. Thus the approach is in no way baffled by their inclusion of any particular words, particularly intentional terms, because those all have history and context to explain them. Misunderstanding this, Foxall makes the incorrect assertion that behavior analysis requires that the “information” (read context) occasioning the utterances including “I” must be identical with that occasioning the utterances including “she.” The information must be of the same type (i.e., natural phenomena), but it is not the same for the one who says “I” and the one who says “she” any more than it would be necessarily the same for any two people who said “I” or any two people who said “she.”

Foxall is misled here, not only by Dennett and Malcolm, but by Skinner himself. Skinner is sometimes the worst source for understanding radical behaviorism because he was often inconsistent and sometimes careless in his use of terms. Foxall includes a particularly unfortunate example (p. 12) in which Skinner uses the word “observe” in a way that suggests a person might observe events and act as a result. This leads Foxall to bring in Malcolm’s argument about observing as a basis for intentional statements. Skinner, however, was using the word “observe” casually, and he probably understood well that observing is not an explanation of behavior but is itself behavior to be explained. Whether Skinner understood this or not, other behaviorists have built on Gilbert Ryle’s (1949) explanations about the logical incoherence of terms like “believe,” “know,” and “desire” when they are taken to explain behavior. One does not “believe in Satan” and say “Satan roams the Earth like a devouring lion,” because part of “believing in Satan” is to say “Satan roams the Earth like a devouring lion.” Ryle calls the attribution of the behavior to the belief a category error because it confuses a category label (the belief) with one of its instances. I (Baum, 2002, 2004) might say, rather, that the utterance is part of a more extended activity (the belief) and
that the mentalistic explanation mistakenly identifies a whole (more extended activity; the belief) as the efficient cause of one of its parts (less extended activity; the utterance), but the point is the same. Similar remarks apply to “observe.” To observe my own headache or someone else’s complaints about having a headache is to behave in the ways that we call by the label “having a headache.” Parts of observing my headache would be events such as saying “I have a headache” and taking aspirin. Parts of observing another person’s headache would be events such as saying “Do you have a headache?” and fetching aspirin for the person.

The point that Foxall gets wrong here is that verbal behavior has nothing to do with reference or content in any conventional sense. Intentional utterances are no more opaque than any others. Intentional utterances may be explained as are other utterances, they may be seen as occasioned by other behavior (one’s own or someone else’s, as in believing), but they are in no way necessary in the terminology of behavior analysis.

Failure to grasp the point that behavior analysis is about behavior leads Foxall to two other errors. In the section on the “continuity” of behavior he suggests that behavior analysis cannot be complete without an explanation of recurrence of behavior from one time and setting to another. This is an example of the question how an event at one time can affect behavior at a later time. We are ignorant of the mechanisms that allow this to happen, but even if physiology were to elucidate it, that would not necessarily affect the analysis of behavior. When Newton proposed the concept of gravity he had no idea how action at a distance might work, but that did not stop him from using the concept in understanding mechanics. Eventually an explanation was conceived by Einstein, but until that happened no gain in productivity could have resulted from filling in the gaps with phony mechanisms (such as invisible hooks). Similarly, nothing is gained by filling in the temporal gaps in behavior or trying to explain the temporal extendedness of behavior by inventing phony processes. Foxall brings up learning (one of the favorite phony processes) to try to talk about recurrence of behavior and asks, with Dennett, what is learned? The problem here is not the need for an answer; the problem lies in the question itself. It is based on the mistaken premise that if behavior reappears it must somehow be represented and stored. The recurrence of natural events in no way requires representation or storage. The sun rises and sets, an unsupported stone falls, combining sodium hydroxide with hydrochloric acid produces sodium chloride and water, a zygote of a sea urchin develops into a sea urchin, and none of these repeated phenomena involves representation or storage in any but the most metaphorical and tortured sense. When we understand the mechanisms by which behavior repeats we will no longer be tempted to speak of it being stored or represented.

By failing to understand that behavior consists of natural events, Foxall makes the other error in supposing that if behavior depends on multiple or complex contexts and consequences, the organism must have the capacities to process information and to select responses. The same remarks about filling in gaps in understanding with phony stopgaps apply, but another point is that behavior analysis is about behavior, not organisms. Behavior analysis is no more about the
person or the pigeon than mechanics is about the Earth or the moon. The aim is to understand those phenomena that we call the behavior of organisms, and in that effort we do well to admit what we do not understand, live with our ignorance, and work toward real understanding instead of introducing unproductive stopgaps such as intentional terms.

References