THE INTENTIONAL AND THE EXTENSIONAL:
A RESPONSE TO RAKOVER

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ABSTRACT: In contrast to Rakover’s approach, I argue that intentional and extensional accounts of behavior are incommensurable, that the former are necessary only when the capacity of the latter to explain behavior cannot be empirically sustained, and that the intentional account takes the form of an interpretation rather than a causal description that can be reduced to functional relationships.

Key words: intentional behaviorism, intentionality, extensional explanation

Any approach to the explanation of behavior that encourages debate among proponents of alternative perspectives is to be welcomed as a stimulus to the growth of knowledge and intellectual development. I am therefore delighted by the methodological pluralism to which Rakover (2011) adverts. While we agree on much, there are four areas in which I would suggest there is room for debate. I argue for (i) the linguistic distinction between the accounts of behavior provided by extensional explanation and intentional interpretation; (ii) delimiting the scope of the intentional account; (iii) the significance of the empirical unavailability of intentional entities; and, consequently, (iv) accentuating the methodological difference between the accounts. I will not rehearse here the full arguments for these issues (see, for instance, Foxall, 2007, 2008) but will outline what I see as essential differences between us.

The difference between extensional and intentional accounts is linguistic not ontological and is based on (a) the referential opacity of intentional sentences, (b) the phenomenon of intentional inexistence, and (c) the impossibility of exact translation of intentional sentences into extensional sentences. The understanding of intentionality in terms of these grammatical usages means that the intentional is not, as Brentano suggested, the mark of the mental but it is the mark of a separate form of exposition and therefore of explanation. This difference is well-recognized by Skinner, who took great care to avoid or explain away the explanatory significance of intentional locutions. There is no implication here of the intentional and extensional referring to separate ontological spheres, of the mental inhering in a mind-stuff that has an independent existence from material reality. The reference

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to a personal level of explanation does not imply an initiating self. This seems to contrast with Rakover’s account of the intentional.

The delimitation of the intentional is necessary because the behaviorist criticism of intentional accounts, which draws attention to the tendency to generate “explanations” in the form of explanatory fictions, is to be taken seriously. If we adopt an intentional stance we have to delimit it rigorously else intentional entities will proliferate as required to fill whatever explanatory gap we open up. I have striven to show that the extensional neuro- and behavioral-sciences are pivotal in this task. Intentional behaviorism seeks to do so in two ways. The first is by having a clear definition of where extensional and intentional accounts are required. Intentional interpretation becomes imperative (i) to account for certain aspects of behavior such as its continuity or discontinuity; (ii) to provide an exposition of behavior at the personal level; and (iii) to delimit the scope of behavioral interpretation (Foxall, 2004). Rakover also attempts to delimit intentional explanation, but I think that these three “imperatives of intentionality” are more straightforward than the spheres of influence that he suggests to demarcate the realms to which mechanistic and mentalistic theories apply.

The second way in which intentional behaviorism delimits intentional exposition is by using the extensional sciences as boundaries of the intentional: where the neuro- and behavioral-sciences explain there is no need for an intentional interpretation; where they do not, the intentional account must be consistent with what the extensional sciences reveal.

The empirical availability of causal entities refers to the capacity of dependent and independent variables to refer to items that can enter into a causal analysis, typically accomplished by the application of the experimental method. An intentional account of behavior is fundamentally different from those provided by the extensional sciences in this regard, rendering its explanations (better: interpretations) tentative and provisional to a much greater degree. The beliefs and desires, feelings and cognitions are not causal entities; they are amenable neither to experimentation nor to being influenced in order to change behavior. They are necessary to our accounts of behavior only insofar as the extensional sciences cannot deal with certain aspects of behavior. I do not get the impression from Rakover’s exposition that he sees intentionality in this light.

The relationship of the intentional to the extensional (of the mentalistic to the mechanistic) is of central concern in any scheme concerned with methodological pluralism.

Rakover goes some to lengths to establish the methodological continuity of the mechanistic and the mentalistic accounts of behavior. However, there is an incommensurable methodological gulf between the intentional and the extensional. Hence, there is no attempt in intentional behaviorism to make its accounts conform to the model of scientific methodology applicable to extensional accounts—rather, there is the aim of emphasizing their differences in order to accentuate the inability of the extensional account to deal with the three imperatives of intentionality. Moreover, the relationship between the extensional and the intentional expositions
is that of an additional layer of intentional interpretation over and above the explanations provided by the extensional sciences (see Dennett, 1969).

In summary, there is no suggestion in intentional behaviorism that the extensional and intentional theories are equivalent or of equal weight: the intentional account is qualitatively different—it is not explaining but interpreting—the whole point is that it is brought into play in the face of a lack of empirical availability of the relevant explanatory variables. But let me end on a positive note: I believe the demonstration of methodological pluralism to be fundamentally important to the future of psychology and reiterate how welcome this opportunity to contribute has been.

References


