In Response

Is a New Version of Philosophical Pragmatism Necessary? A Reply to Barnes-Holmes

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Barnes-Holmes (2000) discussed certain issues regarding philosophy, pragmatism, and behavior analysis, and offered a “behavioral pragmatism” based on or derived from behavior-analytic perspectives. In a comparison of certain philosophical views, Quine’s concept of observation sentences was employed for representing pragmatism, but this concept is not sufficiently representative of the literature of philosophical pragmatism to warrant the broad conclusions drawn by Barnes-Holmes. Further, although the extensive and diverse literature of philosophical pragmatism has been shown by a number of writers to have various themes and perspectives in common with Skinner’s radical behaviorism, it is unnecessary to extract a limited, generic version of pragmatism because (a) the latter cannot match the range and depth of the various extant versions and (b) the problems raised by Barnes-Holmes in justification for the new version yield readily to the current versions in philosophy. A set of philosophical views may provide additional verbal support for a given system of science, and the science of behavior analysis may eventually contribute to philosophical discourse. The latter, however, will not be achieved by proposing new versions of old philosophy, but rather by approaching established philosophical issues in new ways.

Key words: behavior analysis, radical behaviorism, pragmatism, philosophy

Recent years have seen a rapid growth in the literature of radical behaviorism (e.g., Chiesa, 1994; S. C. Hayes & Brownstein, 1986; S. C. Hayes, Hayes, & Reese, 1988; Hine-line, 1980, 1990, 1992; Lattal, 1992; Leigland, 1992, 1997, 1999; Moore, 1990, 1995a, 1995b; Morris, 1997; Smith, 1986; Todd & Morris, 1995; see also Catania & Hine-line, 1996). Generally speaking, contributors to this literature have sought to describe, clarify, and extend the implications of behavior-analytic science. In a recent issue of *The Behavior Analyst*, Barnes-Holmes (2000) provided an interesting addition to this literature by examining certain issues on the relation between philo-

sophical pragmatism and behavior analysis.

Barnes-Holmes (2000) attempted to evaluate a philosophical concept (the observation sentence) that had been proposed by one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, Willard Van Orman Quine, who is widely recognized as representing a particular variation within the pragmatist tradition (e.g., Murphy, 1990). Barnes-Holmes’ evaluation is placed in the context of, and in comparison to, the philosophical views of a prominent behavior analyst, L. J. Hayes (e.g., 1993). On the basis of this comparison, and in the context of issues raised in his earlier work, Barnes-Holmes then proposed a new version of philosophical pragmatism, one that presumably takes behavior analysis as its basis, origin, or foundation.

This commentary addresses two themes arising from Barnes-Holmes (2000). First, some general issues regarding pragmatism are examined briefly, followed by discussion of the relation between philosophical systems

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and behavior analysis as a scientific field.

Why should behavior analysts care about such issues? There are at least two answers to this question. First, if philosophically oriented proposals by behavior analysts entail redundancies or other difficulties, then these difficulties should be identified and subjected to critical analysis, because such positions might influence a variety of practical issues of the scientific field. For example, issues often labeled *philosophical* are associated with questions of what does or does not constitute scientific data, appropriate problems for scientific analysis, the appropriate methods by which those problems might be investigated, the appropriate explanatory practices to be employed following an investigation, and so on. Second, as behavior analysis communicates more often with other fields such as philosophy, the credibility of behavior analysis is increased if the systematic positions it espouses and promotes are consistent, coherent, rigorous, presented in a scholarly fashion, and fully encompassing of its scope as a scientific field. To be sure, Barnes-Holmes raises a number of excellent points and appropriately and productively expands the literature relating behavior analysis to pragmatic philosophy, but it is quite natural that such discussion also introduces complexities that require examination. The process of critical examination is as necessary for such systematic areas of scientific discourse as it is for any other scientific interest.

On Pragmatism

Pragmatic philosophical views are most familiar to behavior analysts through writings that have described behavior-analytic science as contextualistic rather than mechanistic in worldview, drawing on dichotomies advanced by Pepper (e.g., S. C. Hayes et al., 1988; Morris, 1997). In Pepper's taxonomy of worldviews, for example, contextualism is said to be distin-

guished by a "pragmatic truth criterion" as one of its characteristics.

In the larger domain of philosophical discourse, however, pragmatism entails a large and complex literature, marked by a diversity of themes and views (e.g., Murphy, 1990). In drawing a comparison of philosophical perspectives, Barnes-Holmes chose Quine's concept of observation sentences (for behavior analysts, these are essentially tacts, in sentence form, with interobserver agreement) as representative of pragmatic philosophy, noting that other choices were available as well. As reasonable as the choice may be, care should be taken in drawing general conclusions about pragmatism based on a discussion of Quine's concept of observation sentences. One indication of the diversity of pragmatic philosophy is the critical analysis and extension of Quine's work (among others) by such contemporary pragmatist philosophers as Rorty (see Leigland, 1999, for a comparison of Rorty's pragmatism with Skinner's radical behaviorism), and Quine's prominent student, Donald Davidson (e.g., Murphy, 1990).

Barnes-Holmes' examination of Quine's concept of observation sentences appears to serve as the basis for general conclusions regarding pragmatism. This may be seen in Barnes-Holmes' discussions of specific issues concerning Quine's concept, such as "it is difficult to decide whether Hayes is in fact correct in claiming that pragmatists rely ultimately on a correspondence-based truth criterion" (p. 196), and "there may be some substance to Hayes' claim that pragmatism relies ultimately on correspondence as a truth criterion" (p. 201). The danger of such general conclusions based on a specific issue advanced by one person is illustrated by an analogous situation in which someone with a general familiarity with the work of John Watson and Clark Hull might conclude that it is impossible for a behaviorist to be a contextualist (a line of argument once presented to me by a sociologist). Of

course, there are ways to summarize common themes and perspectives among pragmatist philosophers, as well as to provide a sampling of issues, but these strategies require more extensive treatment than provided by Barnes-Holmes.

Pragmatism is often characterized in such terms as the notion that ideas are to be evaluated in terms of their usefulness (e.g., Hergenhahn, 2001), although such simple characterizations are easily misunderstood by critics (e.g., Moxley, 2003). Another way to summarize the most general descriptors of pragmatism is to say that it is antiessentialism, antipositivism, and antirepresentationalism applied to such traditional philosophical topics as *meaning, language, truth, knowledge, morality*, and so on (e.g., Murphy, 1990; Rorty, 1991; one brief description by Rorty runs as follows: "pragmatism, a movement which has specialized in debunking dualisms and in dissolving traditional problems created by those dualisms"; p. 126). A pragmatic approach to philosophical inquiry approaches such traditional theoretical areas of philosophy from the perspective that all such issues must be viewed, described, and discussed from a peculiarly human perspective, that there is no way to step outside of human language, culture, and history to arrive at things the way they truly are, in and of themselves. There is no way to arrive at a context-free "God's-eye view" of nature, morality, or truth, for in the words of William James, "The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything" (James, 1981, p. 33; for relations to radical behaviorism, see Leigland, 1999).

Because of this perspective, pragmatist philosophers often employ a somewhat unusual form of critical discourse (unusual for philosophy, that is), in which formal-sounding "rational argument" is replaced with the challenging of basic assumptions, examinations of the language involved in the philosophical problem, and a reconstructual or recasting of the problem in

such a way that the problem is not necessarily what it seemed. For example, a problem normally viewed as metaphysical may be shown to be an artifact of the language involved. In other words, critical discourse from the pragmatist perspective normally seeks not to engage the problem as it has traditionally been framed, but rather to disengage the problem from its traditional verbal context as a way of short-circuiting the traditional philosophical agenda.

An illustration may be seen by applying the general strategy to an issue raised by Barnes-Holmes, who described a conception of one-universe and two-universe systems (L. J. Hayes, 1993). Beyond the illustration, a second reason for looking at this particular issue is that it marks the starting point in a series of philosophical issues that constitute the thesis of the paper. Barnes-Holmes describes a conception of one-universe and two-universe systems in which the former "resists description" (p. 192) because the act of describing a one-universe system transforms it into a two-universe system. The general argument is seen in the following: "One cannot speak *about* another universe, in a one-universe system, because in doing so one creates a two-universe system (i.e., the universe of speaking and the universe about which one speaks)" (p. 192).

From a behavior-analytic and pragmatic view, we have reasons to examine the dubious question of whether emitting the statement "I assume one universe" must itself necessitate the creation of a second universe because (a) the implied "aboutness" of the statement (b) necessitates the "creation" of a second universe as some sort of "referent." This latter line of reasoning leads one to the position that those who assume a single universe are left with its "oneness, about which one cannot speak" (p. 192). Apparently, one cannot speak of such views in order to hold them (I would assume that this extends to private speech as well), putting those who wish to advocate

such views in a rather difficult position, to say the least. The idea refutes itself as soon as the protagonist speaks of it (or perhaps even thinks of it). From a pragmatist view, the ability for the spoken word to create universes in such a fashion, and then to limit our ability to engage the issues verbally, is a result of a number of assumptions about the ontological power of language.

A much simpler assumption, and one that has the practical advantage of avoiding what appears to be some serious problems of ontology and language, is the assumption that the one universe with which we are familiar contains and includes, along with everything else, all people and their verbal histories and verbal interactions (including, of course, all talk about the universe). The contention that the latter assumption is simpler and has some practical advantages is not a statement of truth, only a statement of possible grounds for preference.

Other examples from Barnes-Holmes might be used as a way of illustrating alternative pragmatic strategies for approaching various philosophical issues, but one brief additional point might be made regarding the title of Barnes-Holmes' paper, "Behavioral Pragmatism: No Place for Reality and Truth." Pragmatist philosophers would likely find the subtitle to be ambiguous and puzzling, as there is most assuredly a place for both reality and truth in philosophical pragmatism. Indeed, there is a place for both in Barnes-Holmes' essay. Undoubtedly, the subtitle refers to implications arising from traditional ideas of absolute truth and context-free "God's-eye view" perspectives on reality, but it is misleading to place such a statement of absolute exclusion in the title of the paper.

In fact, reality and truth are frequently topics of discussion in the literature of philosophical pragmatism (e.g., Murphy, 1990). Characteristically, both terms are returned from the lofty pillars upon which they have stood in academic philosophy to the

status of ordinary language-in-use, or, as behavior analysts would say, the terms are viewed from a functional perspective as verbal behavior. The complexity and status of terms such as *reality* and *truth* in traditional academic philosophy make them prime subjects for the pragmatist agenda. Certainly neither Barnes-Holmes nor other advocates of pragmatist perspectives would be promoting the sort of ontologically rich versions of reality or truth noted above, but the two terms are important terms; no language is forbidden or excluded. There are places for reality and truth, as Barnes-Holmes' discussion of the concepts indicate, and beyond the ordinary-language usages (as when we ask whether our coffee contains real cream or non-dairy whitener; cf. Rorty, 1991), their place may be described as the subjects of a critical analysis of their important roles in traditional philosophical problems.

On Philosophy and Behavior Analysis

The literature relating Skinner's scientific views to philosophical pragmatism is over two decades old (e.g., Baum, 1994; Day, 1980, 1983; S. C. Hayes & Brownstein, 1986; Lamal, 1983; Leigland, 1997, 1999; Moxley, 2001, 2001/2002, 2002, 2003; Schneider, 1997; Zuriff, 1980). In looking at this work and other work published on radical behaviorism, the question arises as to the role or function of such writings in the field of behavior analysis. This question has been discussed in some detail in other sources (e.g., Day, 1983; S. C. Hayes et al., 1988; Leigland, 1997), but briefly, it could be said that such writings address issues of the scientific culture of behavior analysis, for example, issues of defining the subject matter and goals of the field, the practices of explanation and scientific methodology, directions and methods for further development, relations between behavior analysis and other fields, and so on.

If this is the case, then what is the

role or function of relating radical behaviorism (so construed) to established philosophical movements as pragmatism? The function of such an exercise may be described in terms of three goals. First, a literature from another field with themes and perspectives in common with radical behaviorism may help to support or even clarify the implications of the system, providing additional terms, perspectives, and issues with which to explore those implications. Another kind of clarification might be achieved in defining areas in which, for example, pragmatism and radical behaviorism have differing or opposing views (cf. Leigland, 1999). Second, such relations might help to extend the reach of radical behaviorism into additional areas of discourse, or into additional issues, or into additional phenomena of scientific interest. Third, such an exercise facilitates communication with those in other fields with whom we may share at least some interests. For those areas with which we have little in common, the ability to make comparisons to another literature provides another way to begin a description of the perspectives of behavior-analytic science. For example, philosophers are often puzzled by Skinner's work, if not hostile toward it, and know little or nothing of behavior analysis. Beginning a discussion by relating the systematic views involved to pragmatism (although certainly not identifying the views as pragmatism) is a reasonable means for establishing a dialogue that will engage someone with interests in and knowledge of philosophy (of course, in the end, the philosopher could very well dislike behavior analysis even more, but at least any subsequent hostility would likely be based on views more appropriately reflecting behavior analysis).

The next question might be this: Is there any value to behavior analysts inventing new versions of established philosophical movements? Barnes-Holmes proposed a "new" version of pragmatism he termed *behavioral pragmatism*. Part of the motivation for

developing this version of an established philosophical movement was to address a potential problem with Quine's concept of observation sentences, namely that of "homology," which involves questions regarding differences between individual observers of an object or event at the level of physical sensory receptors. Yet this problem has already been addressed in the literature of pragmatic philosophy. For example, Rorty (1979) has pointed out that Quine's issue of intersubjective agreement in such cases concerns verbal practices rather than physiology *per se*.

Another reason suggested for the new version is that it "circumvents . . . the use of a correspondence-based truth criterion" (2000, p. 197). A variety of straightforward statements were made by Barnes-Holmes about pragmatism and truth (e.g., "In short, pragmatists deny any connection between correspondence and truth," p. 194, a statement that is false if taken literally; cf. Rorty, 1991). In truth, however, the diverse positions taken among the pragmatist philosophers regarding truth are extraordinarily complex (e.g., Murphy, 1990; Rorty, 1991). Briefly, in philosophy, correspondence theories of truth claim that truth is agreement with reality, that bits of language have some sort of relationship of correspondence to bits of reality, such as "facts" (which stand apart from human language, history, and culture; in short, from human behavior). The difference between these types of theories of truth and the approach taken by pragmatist philosophers generally is seen in the following passage from Murphy:

We have seen that Davidson, in speaking of coherence and correspondence theories of truth, does not intend to explain what truth consists in. Like James and Dewey before him, Davidson rejects the subject-object dualism . . . that creates the need for such an explanation for the nature of truth. Like James, Davidson sees "true" as "a term of praise, a term used for endorsing, rather than one referring to a state of affairs the existence of which explained, e.g., the practical successes of those who held true beliefs." (pp. 111-112)

In other words, the traditional philosophical problem of the nature of truth is turned into a problem of verbal behavior. The concerns expressed by Barnes-Holmes regarding "correspondence between the statement and a nonbehavioral, ontological reality," a problem that "behavioral pragmatism" seeks to solve, has been a focal point of the literature of pragmatic philosophy from the beginning. In fact, pragmatism has even been defined as anti-representationalism (see Murphy, 1990), or the view that it is impossible for human beings to arrive at a context-free ontological reality of things and events in and of themselves, a reality traditionally said to be more or less accurately "represented" by language or mind. For example, in the pragmatic view, the language of physics is not said to "accurately represent" the way things "really are," but rather is an especially useful vocabulary when certain goals of prediction and control arise (e.g., Leigland, 1999; Murphy, 1990; Rorty, 1991).

Here we see that the justification for a new "behavioral" pragmatism is preempted by the extant literature of pragmatism. The point is not that all issues have been resolved to everyone's satisfaction, of course, but rather that such problems as those noted by Barnes-Holmes yield readily to the varieties of philosophical pragmatism already available. A generic version with the added label of "behavioral" is unnecessary.

Another reason for offering a new "behavioral" pragmatism is seen in a footnote by Barnes-Holmes that mentions similarities between "behavioral pragmatism" and the philosophical pragmatism of Rorty (one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers and pragmatists; cf. Leigland, 1999). Barnes-Holmes notes as well that the two are different. The only difference noted is that "behavioral pragmatism" is "strongly rooted in the epistemology of behavior analysis and the philosophy of radical behaviorism, neither of

which, as far as I am aware, has influenced Rorty's work" (p. 200).

But why must a new and generic version of an extant philosophical system be reinvented by a behavior analyst? Pragmatism was developed in response to, and in the context of, a set of traditional philosophical problems and issues. A limited and generic version, derived from a scientific field with a different set of goals, methods, and problems, will likely be of no use to philosophers, who have the full and developing armamentarium of philosophical pragmatism at their disposal. It will add nothing to behavior-analytic science for the same reason. Although behavior analysis may indeed have contributions to make to philosophy (perhaps through an empirically based "ordinary-language philosophy" based on a functional analysis of verbal behavior; e.g., Leigland, 1996), the point is that behavior-analytic contributions to philosophy should break new ground, reveal new problems and methods of investigation, and establish bold new directions, rather than abstract various features out of established positions in philosophy.

The arguments presented here do not detract from the excellent points raised by Barnes-Holmes in his descriptions of a number of important issues. His discussions illustrate the need for behavior analysts to explore productive relations with a variety of views in fulfilling the goals of support, clarification, extension, and communication noted above. The developing literature of philosophical pragmatism is one that has been shown to be worth exploring, and there may be others, such as certain areas of phenomenology (e.g., Day, 1969b; Kvale & Grenness, 1967), hermeneutics (e.g., Day, 1988; Miller, 1994), and ordinary-language philosophy (Day, 1969a; Miles, 1994).

As a philosophical movement, pragmatism stands to traditional academic philosophy as behavior analysis (radical behaviorism) stands to traditional academic psychology. Both entail unusual views that reconfigure traditional

problems into issues of language, history, and culture, in short, into issues of human beings (and other creatures) in interaction with the world. Barnes-Holmes suggests that, for the practicing scientist, "behavioral pragmatism" results in "the discomfort of a pointless, goal-based science" (p. 200). Here he means, of course, "pointless" only in the sense of an ultimate metaphysical point or goal. Yet "pointless" should not be taken as wholly arbitrary, because the goals of scientists develop in the context of the scientific and larger cultures, as Barnes-Holmes' interesting discussion makes clear.

Barnes-Holmes says further that "behavioral pragmatism . . . leaves us hanging naked in the wind with nothing but our own personal goals for protection against the cold wind of professional and academic life" (p. 200), but this is true for pragmatism in general no more so than for any other antifoundationalist philosophical movement. Yet we have much more than our personal goals, as philosophical pragmatists have emphasized (e.g., Rorty, 1989, 1991); we have the shared goals of being part of a scientific community, and in this spirit of community, Barnes-Holmes is to be commended for his addition to the developing behavior-analytic literature of pragmatism, philosophy, and science.

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