Mechanistic Ontology and Contextualistic Epistemology: Response to Barnes and Roche

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In an interesting commentary, Barnes and Roche (1994) generally agreed with my (Reese, 1993a) conclusion that behavior analysis is consistent with a mechanistic ontology and a contextualistic epistemology, and they suggested that this mixture of world-views constitutes a contradiction, or at least a paradox, that can be resolved in several ways. Their commentary raises three additional points on which I would like to comment. The first is a clarification and extension of one of the resolutions, “materialistic objective idealism,” which is linked to me (Barnes & Roche, 1994, p. 166); the second is about the possible relevance of Zukav’s (1979) position to behavior analysis; and the third is about whether analyses and commentaries such as Barnes and Roche’s are prescriptive or descriptive.

Materialistic Objective Idealism

I suggest that Barnes and Roche’s (1994) phrase “materialistic objective idealism” is internally contradictory because materialism asserts that only matter exists and idealism asserts that only ideas (ideal forms) exist. Barnes and Roche seem to attribute the conception to me (p. 166), perhaps because of an ambiguity in my personal communication to them. I said that Lenin’s position in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1927), in which he ridiculed subjective idealism, was that “the sources of sensations are external to the mind, and that even though we can have direct knowledge of only our

sensations, we can infer from them their sources in the real world. Lenin’s position is consistent with any materialism and with objective idealism, and if the materialist version is adopted, his position is consistent with contextualism.” Barnes and Roche seem to have interpreted “the materialist version” to refer to objective idealism, but I intended it to refer to Lenin’s position (thus, “the materialist version of Lenin’s position”).

Lenin’s position in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* can be interpreted consistently with materialism or with objective idealism because both of these views, unlike subjective idealism, assume a reality that exists outside the mind: reality as formed matter and reality as matterless forms (ideal forms), respectively. The point with respect to objective idealism is not directly relevant to behavior analysis, but the point with respect to materialism is relevant because materialism can be interpreted mechanistically or contextualistically. Lenin’s position is a convenient vehicle for illustrating the latter point.

Lenin’s position was that sensations are normally true copies of reality. In the materialist version, his position is consistent with two aspects of mechanistic epistemology—the copy theory of knowledge and, consequently, the correspondence theory of truth (described, e.g., by Hayes, Hayes, & Reese, 1988). Given these theories, the only reasonable ontology is also mechanistic: Mechanistic epistemology dictates that mechanists represent (know) the universe as like a machine, and the copy theory of knowledge tells them that what they know (sensation) is a copy of reality; therefore, the universe must actually be like a machine (mech-

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anistic ontology). Persons have direct knowledge of their sensations, and the copy theory of knowledge tells mechanists that sensations are copies of reality; therefore, they can infer the nature of reality from their sensations.

Lenin's position is also consistent with contextualistic epistemology. The philosophy he explicitly adopted was dialectical materialism, and dialectical materialism is consistent with contextualism (Reese, 1993b). For example, Prosch (1964) pointed out that dialectical materialists (he said "Marxists") and contextualists (he said "pragmatists") accept the same truth criterion, although they emphasize different aspects of it:

[Marxists and pragmatists both] reject the unknowability of the Kantian "thing-in-itself" by referring to the facts of practice. To say that we do not know what things are *really* like when we know how to control them and to make them do our bidding is most absurd, they *both* say. They both therefore find that our views of things are right when they fit the way matter is actually working. But the Marxists concentrate their attention in such a proposition as this upon the "matter," while the pragmatists concentrate theirs upon the "working." (p. 346, bracketed material added)

Therefore, Lenin's position that knowledge is a copy of reality can be derived from contextualistic successful working, with matter emphasized, instead of the mechanistic copy theory of knowledge and correspondence theory of truth. Based on successful working, knowledge is known to be a true copy of reality because practice based on this knowledge would otherwise not be successful.

Relevance of Zukav's Position

Barnes and Roche (1994) seem to recommend that behavior analysts give serious attention to Zukav's (1979) interpretation of physics. However, Zukav was not a physicist, and his book contains many footnotes in which his physicist consultants disagreed with his interpretations. Also, although Zukav talked about interaction as the essence of existence, his interpretation was not contextualistic—it was mystical, spe-

cifically based on Zen Buddhism, and it was not only mentalistic but also panpsychic in that he attributed consciousness to photons (pp. 63, 283). A number of behavior analysts have been exploring the usefulness of Zen Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies to behavior analysis, but I doubt that Zukav's mentalistic mysticism would be useful.

Prescription Versus Description

Several commentators (but not Barnes and Roche) have attributed to me the position that behavior analysts *should* adopt contextualism. Actually, I have never said that behavior analysts should adopt any particular ontology or epistemology; I have described what I believe most behavior analysts *do*, not what I believe they *should* do. In the same vein, Barnes and Roche suggest some possible consequences of the mechanist-contextualist contradiction or paradox they identified and the consequences of some possible resolutions. They seem to favor one resolution over the others, and I anticipate that they will be accused of prescribing it even though they actually only describe it. My view is that the function of analyses and commentaries such as theirs and mine is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Barnes and Roche's suggesting what might happen if behavior analysts continue to do what they now do and what might happen if they do something other than what they now do is consistent with this view.

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