



Perspectives on the nature of being, becoming and reality from contextual behavioral science



Some argue that the depth of a scientist can be defined by its ability to understand and grasp deep philosophical issues that concern not just what is knowledge, but how are things known. Such minds have a natural inclination to drink from philosophical discourse, yet they might not be in the business of professional philosophy. This deep connection between science and philosophy is not surprising since philosophical discourse is at the core of what science is about, and both start with a very essential cognitive act: *a question*.

Contextual behavioral science has proposed for decades that exploring and understanding our philosophical assumptions is a required aspect of our craft, and since the mind of a scientist is also the mind of an explorer, many clinicians and practitioners have also embarked in this endeavor. As a result, a large body of literature has been published over the years, with numerous contributions examining the importance of philosophical issues and the direct connection between Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and its functional contextual philosophy (e.g., Biglan & Hayes, 1996; Hayes, 2004; Hayes, Hayes, Reese, & Sarbin, 1993; Long, 2013; Vilardaga, Hayes, & Schelin, 2007). This literature has addressed a very important and critical question: *What is reality?*, a question that in philosophy, falls under the rubric of “ontology”, a branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of being, becoming, existence, or reality, and that has been approached from a variety of philosophical traditions (e.g., essentialism, phenomenology, etc.).

Functional contextualism argues about the need to hold a pragmatic truth criterion – an approach to the original question “what is reality” – and in some forums this position has been described as “aontological”. This statement, in particular, has generated a great deal of controversy among contextual behavioral scientists themselves and among academics from related disciplines. Inspired by this debate, this special issue attempted to provide a solid platform to present and elaborate these ideas in full length.

1. This special issue

First, James Herbert and Flavia Padovani (this issue; Herbert & Padovani) describe their view on the subject matter of ontology by arguing that the assumption of an “independent, textured substratum”, is a requirement that is consistent with the analytic goals of functional contextualism and that might have the benefit of facilitating communication with related disciplines. This paper

lead to a reply by Monestès and Villatte (this issue; Monestès & Villatte), who argue that the only selection criterion in psychological science should be the goals of the scientists themselves, not a putative reality or substratum.

In a second paper, Sam Leigland (this issue; Leigland) described functional contextual and radical behavioral views on the issue of “reality” or the “one world”. The critical question as to whether there is a reality is answered in the context of the verbal and nonverbal practices of behavioral science itself using a radical behavioral approach, that is, turning the analytic lens to make sense of the behavior of the analyst. Finally, Leigland suggests that Relational Frame Theory might be a descriptive and analytic scientific epistemology that can answer philosophical and ontological questions.

In a third article, Thomas Szabo and Jonathan Tarbox (this issue; Szabo & Tarbox) tackled the same question from a different angle. In their view, silence about ontological statements is a necessary quality of contextual behavioral science. However, bridging scientific communities through interdisciplinary collaboration is an important means to enhance the quality and strength of our science, and ontological language can serve that function by facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration.

In a final piece, Trent Codd (this issue; Codd) pursues three objectives. First, he introduces philosopher of science Bas C. van Fraassen's Constructive Empiricism. Next, having introduced this body of work to the reader he uses van Fraassen's arguments to pursue a defense of aontology. Finally, he discusses the advantages, for the contextual behavioral scientist, of adopting the aontological stance.

2. Future directions

We hope this special issue will expand the richness and depth of the contextual behavioral debate around the nature of being, becoming, existence and reality. The ideas presented here are meant to continue to spark more questions and debate and thus nourish the avid minds of a growing number of contextual behavioral researchers and practitioners.

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