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Can a Christian be a Good Behavior Analyst? Yes, Indeed!



by Kathleen VanTol

Is behaviorism “an anti-Christian theory” and a “denial of the gospel,” as Gordon Clark claims in an article for the *Trinity Review*?¹ Does behaviorism really deny the “innate value and worth of the human being?”² In our clinical work and in our teaching, we have frequently spoken with people who sincerely questioned whether it was possible to simultaneously be a Christian and a behavior analyst. We believe that it is not only possible but often desirable. This manuscript is our response to those who ask, “Can a person be a good behavior analyst and also be a Christian?” Gallup polling revealed that in 2017

about three-fourths of Americans identified with a Christian faith,³ although not all of them were active participants. We cannot provide a count of the number of Christian behavior analysts, but we personally know many behavior analysts who identify themselves as Christian. We propose that Christians can adopt the methodology of the discipline without necessarily adopting the worldview with which it is most usually associated and can use Applied Behavior Analysis, the clinical branch of our discipline, to help people in need and thereby glorify God. We encourage them to do so.

While different sects disagree on the relative importance of faith and good works, all Christians generally see good works as an outflowing of their faith. The nature of faith is such that it is demonstrated through its application, as emphasized in the following Biblical passages:

- “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:4)
- “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)
- “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2: 14-17)⁴

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Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is a tool that we, and many others, have used to make life better for people with autism and other developmental disabilities. We have also taught many students to use ABA to help others. Furthermore, in a seminal article published in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* in 1968, Baer, Wolf, and Risley describe “applied” as one of the defining dimensions of the field.⁵ According to Baer et al., this dimension indicates that behaviors are selected for change “because of their importance to man and society.”⁶ It is hard to imagine a sound Christian argument against working to produce beneficial changes in such behaviors.

It is also hard to imagine that Christians would object to the *Professional and Ethical Compliance Code* promulgated by the Behavior Analysis Certification Board, which is the organization that certifies behavior analysts. Consider the first three items listed under “Integrity”:

- (a) Behavior analysts are truthful and honest and arrange the environment to promote truthful and honest behavior in others.
- (b) Behavior analysts do not implement contingencies that would cause others to engage in fraudulent, illegal, or unethical conduct.
- (c) Behavior analysts follow through on obligations, and contractual and professional commitments with high quality work and refrain from making professional commitments they cannot keep.⁷

These dictates are consistent with Christian teaching, and there is nothing in the use of behavior-analytic procedures to help others that is sinful or otherwise unchristian. Moreover, there is solid scientific evidence of the value of such procedures for improving the behavior of people with autism and in other applications.⁸ Given these considerations, it is no surprise that a substantial number of Christians work as applied behavior analysts. On one level, the answer to “Can a person be a good behavior analyst and also be a Christian?” is a simple and resounding “yes,” because it is easy to find men and women who are both devout Christians and effective applied

behavior analysts.

However, an adequate answer is more complicated. ABA is one of the three major components of the discipline of behavior analysis.⁹ The subject matter of behavior analysis is variability in behavior, and behavior analysts attempt to account for that variability by experimentally isolating orderly relations between or among certain changes in an individual’s environment (environmental inputs) and subsequent changes in the actions of that individual (behavioral outputs). Once isolated and categorized, those relations constitute the principles of a science of behavior. As noted, applied behavior analysts use those principles to bring about meaningful improvements in the behavior of their clients. For example, some kinds of behavioral consequences make it more likely that responses that produce such consequences will occur under such circumstances in the future. Such consequences are termed “reinforcers,” and the process through which they affect behavior is called “reinforcement.” Reinforcement is a valuable tool for teaching people to behave in ways that benefit themselves and other people.

Similarly, Christians recognize that people are formed and influenced by their environment. James K. A. Smith, in his book *You Are What You Love*,¹⁰ expands on this idea from a Christian perspective. He says that our habits are formed through our practices and our experiences. He even recognizes that desires can be formed without our even having a conscious awareness that this is happening: “You might have Bible verses on the wall in every room of the house and yet the unspoken rituals reinforce self-centeredness rather than sacrifice.”¹¹ Thus, Smith argues, we need to be intentional about developing responses to the world that reflect our beliefs. To do that, we need to train these responses in ways that are similar to the ways in which we train our muscles; that is, we need to practice the responses that we desire. He says that temptation is not so much based on wrong decisions as it is based on wrong habits and that overcoming our vices requires more than knowledge; it requires us to reform what it is that we love. In a real sense, what Smith calls “reforming what we love” involves changing the consequences of our actions.

Activities intended to delineate how changes in the environment affect behavior are collectively designated as the “experimental analysis of behavior” (EAB), which is the second component of behavior analysis. There is nothing in Christianity that makes it incompatible with EAB; anyone can search for orderly relations between environmental inputs and behavioral outputs, as can be seen in Smith’s book. The value of a person’s findings will depend on the questions he or she asks and the methods he or she uses to answer those questions, not on that person’s overarching beliefs about the world in which those findings are obtained.

Applied behavior analysts use the principles revealed (or clarified) through EAB to address learning and behavioral struggles with their clients. The strategies they use are based on changing the environment in ways that foster desirable behaviors and reduce harmful ones

As a case in point, research has shown that much of the inappropriate behavior that occurs in schools, such as having tantrums, occurs because such responding either produces adult attention or allows students to escape from requested activities.¹² That is, the function of the inappropriate behavior is to produce reinforcers, in the form of either attention or escape from activities. Knowing that this is the case allows applied behavior analysts to develop strategies for reducing those behaviors. For example, if a student’s tantrums have previously been reinforced by adult attention, intervention might involve teaching the child an appropriate response for garnering attention (e.g., raising one hand) while failing to attend to tantrums, a strategy known as functional communication training.¹³

Of course, isolating relations between and among environmental inputs and behavioral outputs presupposes that the relations are lawful and consistent. Put differently, behavior analysis is based on the assumption of determinism, that is, the notion that one thing causes another. In that, it is not different from any other science.

Even though the founder of our field was not a Christian, the field is conducive and hospitable to practitioners who hold to the tenets of the Christian faith.

The aspect of behavior analysis that addresses the fundamental nature of the world, and provides the philosophical underpinnings of the discipline, is “radical behaviorism,” a philosophy of science developed by B. F. Skinner.¹⁴ The tenets of radical behaviorism can pose substantial concerns for Christians. Many of those concerns are the same as those that arise when religious and scientific approaches to the same subject matter are generally considered. It is important to recognize that there has long been and continues to be a rigorous debate about their compatibility. People come at the issue from different perspectives and use different standards of evidence in reaching their conclusions, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider these points. Rather, we argue only that behavior analysts have nothing to gain by rejecting people of faith and that Christians can be honest and effective behavior analysts.

Let us return to the issue of determinism. If it is true that *all* that humans do is determined by historical and current circumstances, which is sometimes termed “strong determinism,” then the concept of free will, which is central to the Christian conception of moral responsibility,¹⁵ is meaningless. Recognizing this dilemma is one reason that Christianity may appear incompatible with behavior analysis. But it is important for us to recognize that it is possible to have a valid and useful science of human behavior if *much, but not all*, that people do is functionally related to (i.e., caused by) specifiable aspects of their environment. There is clear evidence that changes in the environment (and other empirical variables, such as genetic variations) predictably influence human behavior. In fact, one could persuasively argue that “weak determinism” is evident in the success of ABA, which would not be possible if behavior analysts could not both predict and control human behavior, but the extent of that prediction and control is limited.

Of course, unexplainable variability in human behavior may simply be the result of inad-

equate analysis, and even if it is present, it very well may be due to *slop in the system*, not the actions of a thinking, feeling entity. Even in the *hard* sciences, relations among variables typically are expressed in probabilistic, not absolute, terms. The reason for the imprecision may be the fundamental nature of the phenomena of interest, or the actions of other, unknown variables. But a third possibility when it comes to human behavior is that it may be due to a person's exploring, evaluating, and choosing among possible courses of action—that is, exercising what is commonly termed “free will.” Interestingly, both John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards argued for a shift from the term “free will” to simply “freedom,” meaning unconstrained, as there are “a multitude of influences and causes external to the will.”¹⁶ Although these actions may very well have been influenced, at least in part, by prior events, they appear to the one engaging in the behavior to be freely selected; and society at large, even most behavior analysts, treats them as if that is the case.

An unfortunate recent event involving our colleague Richard Malott clearly illustrates that many behavior analysts assume that a person actively chooses to behave in a particular fashion and should therefore be held accountable for her or his actions. Dr. Malott was making an invited presentation at the 2018 CalABA convention and in so doing made some ill-chosen remarks that some attendees viewed as racist and sexist. They acted rapidly and forcefully to terminate his presentation, cancel a lifetime achievement award that he was scheduled to achieve, and both vilify and penalize him personally and professionally. Clearly, they acted as if he had been *free to choose* how he behaved. In that, they were following a long precedent. Skinner, for example, rejected the notion of “autonomous man,” but he consistently argued that humans could use a science of behavior to substantially improve their lot.¹⁷ And Dr. Richard Malott himself, a prominent behavior analyst, has argued long and well that we should “save the world through behavior analysis.” How can such things—either inadvertently using language that is offensive in being misconstrued or saving the world through behavior analysis—occur if it is not somehow possible to escape the

chain of causality and move in a desired direction? Doing so may or may not involve “free will,” but the confusion over Dr. Malott was a semantic issue, not a substantive one.

Similarly, Skinner rejected dualistic analyses of behavior, which propose that a nonmaterial entity, a “soul,” “mind,” or “psyche,” influences human actions.¹⁸ But an important component of Skinner's radical behaviorism, which sets it apart from the behaviorism of earlier behaviorists such as John B. Watson,¹⁹ is the notion that private events, including covert responses such as thinking about response options and their consequences, are real and potentially important. For Christians, such private events can be evidence of an eternal soul, but for many behavior analysts they are not, in part because they are not observable or verifiable. There is no possible evidence that will resolve the issue to the satisfaction of all involved, and there is little to be gained by secular and Christian behavior analysts debating it.

As an adult, Skinner was an atheist, but he was not antagonistic towards Christianity or other faiths, although he was rightly critical of the historical misdeeds associated with them. Toward the end of his long life, he wrote,

Religious faiths have been responsible for beautiful architecture, music, painting, scripture, prose, and poetry. They have held people together in durable communities. At times they have helped people behave well towards one another and manage their own lives more successfully.²⁰

Even though the founder of our field was not a Christian, the field is conducive and hospitable to practitioners who hold to the tenets of the Christian faith.

Behavior analysis provides tools that Christians can use to improve the lives of other people and to live their own lives successfully. For example, ABA is the basis for nearly all of the interventions proven useful for improving the lives of people with autism (See the evidence-based interventions identified by the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder).²¹ Those and related interventions also benefit people with other developmental disabilities, as well as individuals with

no diagnostic label. Behavior analysts have, for example, developed interventions that increase safety in the workplace and on the highways.²² It makes perfect sense for Christians to make full use of these interventions.

It is even possible to adopt the methods of ABA while setting aside some of the philosophical considerations. In making this claim, we should recognize that some Christians find certain aspects of radical behaviorism to be so objectionable that they dismiss behavior analysis in its entirety. It should also be noted that some behavior analysts recognize that the field has a “public image problem” and have called for members of the behavior-analytic community to consider why the field is off-putting for some potential consumers.^{23,24} Julie M. Smith takes it a step further, urging behavior analysts to develop strategies to update the field, such as changing the focus of behavior change from a “simple behavior change on animals and children in controlled environments” to “work for human behavior change across the lifespan in all its complexity, including thoughts and feelings.”²⁵ Perhaps if behavior analysis were updated in ways suggested by Julie Smith, the discipline would have wider acceptance among many, including Christians.

We encourage behavior analysts who are not Christians, including atheists and agnostics, to be more tolerant of worldviews other than radical behaviorism and to make people of faith welcome. ABA is growing rapidly, with an 800% increase in the number of jobs available for Board Certified Behavior Analysts from 2010 to 2017.²⁵ The field offers excellent employment opportunities and has the potential for growth outside the area of developmental disabilities. Recall the data with which we opened our remarks—75% of Americans identify as Christians—and it becomes clear that behavior analysis will permeate our culture only to the extent that Christians embrace it. We live in challenging times, times when all people of good will have much to gain by working together and much to lose by moving apart. Christians and behavior analysts have no call for rancor, and a “Christian behavior analyst” is not an oxymoron. Rather, when a person of faith is given powerful tools for helping others,

the result is a true blessing to the world.

Endnotes

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