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What is Intentionality?

At the very least behaviorists should consider the problem of intentionality to be a most interesting case of verbal behavior, not to be dismissed but to be explored and understood. The standard behavioristic line that the mental is the fictional is just not good enough. (Schnaitter, 1999, p. 239)

Scientific explanation is verbal behavior. Any attempt to comprehend behaviorism as a philosophy of psychology requires an appreciation of how its practitioners use language. It also requires some familiarity with the ways in which competing systems of explanation use language. For this reason alone, we cannot avoid intentionality. Some behaviorist rebuttals of intentional explanation do not even mention that it inheres above all in a particular form of linguistic usage, even before any ontological questions have been settled. Dennett, for example, is repeatedly cited by behaviorists, though sometimes without understanding of what he said and how it has changed over the decades. It seems essential, therefore, to understand the nature of intentionality and to contrast it with the extensional explanation towards which behaviorism has traditionally striven. For, whatever our aims, if we use intentional language, we are using intentional explanation. Intentional explanation is both in widespread use among behaviorists, and in any cases necessary to a behavioral science approach. Better, therefore, to identify where it is used, perhaps where it needs to be used, than to simply deny it. In particular, I want to address the question: To what extent does intentionality, as well as behaviorism, elucidate the findings of consumer behavior analysis?

Social cognitive psychology accounts for choice by arguing that the consumer buys this or that brand because she prefers it, likes it, wants it
or needs it, has a positive attitude toward it, or intends to purchase it, and despite the increased complexity of social cognitive psychology in recent decades, this level of understanding suffices for much semi-popular marketing writing and as the foundation of more serious research. Indeed, the ubiquity of mentalistic terminology and explanation in consumer research is evidenced by both standard textbook treatments and the research reported in leading journals. Consumer behavior is ascribed generally to mental processing and its outcomes in the form of brand beliefs, brand attitudes and brand-related purchase and discontinuance intentions. But what justifies this cognitive stance? Although there is no shortage of discussion of the most appropriate methods by which this assumption can be demonstrated, it is seldom questioned that the cognition–behavior approach is a legitimate source of explanation, and rare among consumer researchers to go beyond the formalism of social cognitive psychology in order to examine the philosophical basis of the explanation that is being offered. Usually in empirical work it is sufficient that coefficients reach a conventional level of significance for hypotheses to be accepted, for knowledge of the phenomena under investigation to be assumed. And critical theoretical work is rare enough to constitute no threat to the prevailing order.

The italicized words in the opening sentence are all intentionalistic terms: as such, they represent not just an alternative way of expressing what we mean when we describe someone’s behavior but a radically different kind of explanation of that behavior. The reason for giving a special designation to words of the kind italicized is that they are all about something other than themselves. (For exposition, see, inter alia, Anscombe, 1957; Chisholm, 1957; Dennett, 1969; Searle, 1983). Most terms that we think of as mentalistic are intentional in referring to or representing something outside themselves: it is impossible just to know: we know that something; or just to believe: we believe that this or that is the case; or just to desire: again we desire some thing or other. These words are therefore different from many others that do no have mentalistic import: we do not walk that, or push that, or sit that in the sense that these verbs imply something other than themselves in an aboutness sort of way. The precise meaning of these “attitudes” as they are known to philosophers is denoted by the proposition that follows them. We might say, for instance, “Steve knows that the person who heads the Roman Catholic Church is the Pope.” Yet we it might not be true to say “Steve knows that the person who heads the Roman Catholic Church is Benedict XVI,” since he