

## **Relationism, Ontology, and Other Concerns**

Willis F. Overton Michelle D. Ennis

Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa., USA

The issues raised by Sokol and Martin are complex and deserve a relatively lengthy and detailed reply. However, given the limited space allocated to commentary replies, and given further that any lengthy reply would undoubtedly provide the opportunity for additional confusions, we will but briefly address each of the points raised.

Sokol and Martin worry that a relational worldview would operate at a higher level of abstraction than other worldviews. This is incorrect. The relational worldview presents the argument that contextualism and organicism are best understood as two sides of a single coin, and this coin is relationism. If anything, the claim would be that neither contextualism nor organicism are adequate to the criteria of worldviews, but that relationism is adequate. Further, despite Sokol and Martin's protestations, there is no eclecticism involved here. We are not picking and choosing parts of a worldview, we are claiming that relationism introduces the *coherence* that permits contextualism-organicism to constitute a worldview.

In a related fashion, Sokol and Martin worry that relationism as a worldview may explain too much. This criticism is difficult to understand as the authors themselves earlier seem to recognize that one of the criteria of a worldview is that it has 'unlimited scope' (i.e., be capable of including everything). To reference someone who has a similar confusion does not make the argument any more valid.

Sokol and Martin claim that the relational principles of the 'identity of opposites' and the 'opposites of identity' "present a number of logical quandaries." The fault in this criticism is that each of their supposed quandaries focuses exclusively on the 'identity of opposites' and never introduces either the 'opposites of identity' or the final relational principle, 'the synthesis of wholes.' For example, the complaint is made that from the vantage point of the identity of opposites "it becomes particularly difficult to understand the possibility of the 'differentiated polarities' required by a relational metatheory." The direct answer to this worry is that differentiated polarities emerge from the opposites of identity moment of analysis, and not from the identity of opposites moment.

In a similar fashion, it is true that ‘interpenetration’ is a concept that derives from the identity of opposites moment of analysis. And it is true that this notion moves us away from questions such as: Which are foundational, genes or culture? Which should we privilege, genes or culture? How much of any behavior is due to genes, how much to culture? This movement is ‘question begging’ only if one operates within a worldview that claims that there are pure forms, that one of these pure forms represents some fixed bed-rock reality, and that the task of knowing is to reduce appearance (genes, culture) to this reality (genes, culture). If one operates within a relational worldview these questions are not begged, they simply become meaningless. A worldview provides the criteria for what are and are not meaningful questions. Within a relational world, when the principles of the opposites of identity and the synthesis of wholes come to the fore, other questions concerning the roles played by genes and culture in behavior and development become relevant (see Overton [2004] for an extended discussion of genes and culture), and become the basis for scientific explorations.

The most important inaccuracy in the Sokol and Martin critique is the suggestion that the relational worldview proposes no ontology as a complement to its epistemology. The present article was designed to illustrate *one of several* potential values of assuming a relational stance – that of demonstrating how sometimes seemingly incompatible theories may, to the benefit of scientific advances in our knowledge, be recast as complementary research programs. To this end the focus of the article is epistemological. However, if Sokol and Martin had explored any of several other recent discussions on relationism [e.g., Overton, 1998, 2003], or even one that they reference in their commentary [Overton, 1991], they would have realized that Overton has never shown an ‘aversion ... toward ontology’ nor a belief that ‘all ontological claims are tied to some form of *substance* metaphysics.’ They would also have been aware that in those writings there are very explicit analyses of the nature, history, and implications of the ontological side of this ontological-epistemological set of principles called relationism.

The ontology of relationism is most emphatically not a substance ontology; it is a process ontology [Bickhard, 2004], which has classically been defined as the ontology of Becoming. This ontology includes process, activity, change, and organization as basic categories, in contrast with the exclusive categories of substance, stability, fixity, and uniformity found in split ontologies. The ontology of Becoming traces back to Anaximander and Heraclitus, and became fully articulated in the works of Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel. John Dewey did, indeed, operate within the context of an ontology of Becoming [see Overton, 1998], but it has been the contemporary work of the hermeneuticist Hans Georg Gadamer [1989] that has explicitly identified Becoming as the ontological face of relationism [see Overton, 1998]. In a chapter titled ‘Play as the Clue to Ontological Explanation,’ Gadamer [1989] argues that the basic ontological categories are identified in the relational ‘to-and-fro’ movement of play:

The movement of playing ... renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. The movement of play as such has, as it were, *no substrate*. ... Play clearly represents *an order* in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself. It is part of play that the movement is ... without effort. It happens, as it were, by itself (pp. 103–104, *emphasis added*).

Gadamer further argues that play is close to the ‘mobile form of nature’ (p. 105) and that it is out of this mobile to-and-fro activity that change, defined as a ‘transformation into structure,’ (p. 110) occurs. Translated into contemporary psychological terms we here have the relational joining of the ontological and the epistemological: The to-and-fro movement of assimilation-accommodation, along with the to-and-fro movement of the behavior-analytic variation and the cognitive-developmental organization, which results in the developmental change identified as transformations into various hierarchical orders of mental organization or structure.

Sokol and Martin’s third concern involving the preservation of the ‘real’ differences between cognitive-developmental and behavior-analytic theories is a sentiment with which we agree, provided a particular clarification is made. Preserving theoretical distinctions is important at a specific moment of analysis (i.e., the opposites of identity), but it is crucial to understand that these differences in cognitive-developmental and behavior-analytic theory are due to the theoretical line of sight and the explanatory language associated with each line of sight. Within a relational metatheory, the differences do not reflect fundamental ontological/epistemological differences in the understanding of psychological process and human development, as is the case when these theories are grounded in a split metatheoretical frame. Again, this is not to claim that there is no ontology associated with relationism. Rather, the claim is that within relational metatheory, in the moment of analysis when theories are viewed as distinct, the differences cannot be accounted for on the basis of either epistemological or ontological assumptions. This does not make the distinctions any less ‘real,’ but it does locate them a different level of analysis than distinctions made on the basis of differing epistemological-ontological assertions. And because the distinctions are not epistemological-ontological, a door to research collaboration, cooperation, and unification is opened.

The mental-behavioral distinction mentioned by Sokol and Martin is a particularly difficult dichotomy to address in limited space because it has long been the primary source of the conflict between the behavior-analytic and the cognitive-developmental. It is important to emphasize that the understanding ‘the mental is a class of the behavioral’ is Skinnerian, but only if the ‘mental’ is defined as covert activity that Skinner termed ‘private events,’ and this view does not explicitly address the cognitive-developmental understanding that the mental is the *organization* of activity. In rejecting cognitivism, Skinner eschewed the notion that discrete mental events cause overt behavior, or that such events serve as intervening variables, which was likely Skinner’s bold attempt to establish a non-dualistic approach. But in doing so he established a false monism that in effect retained the old dichotomy while marginalizing one side (i.e., the mental). Conceptualizing the mental as the *form or organization of process* and behavior as activity (i.e., process) functionally related to its environmental context, a relational metatheory discards the ‘nothing-but’ monism in favor of the holistic process of action that can be viewed from the mental and/or the behavioral perspectives without marginalizing either.

The final section of the Sokol and Martin commentary broadly represents a dismissal of the value of establishing a base from which the behavior-analytic and the cognitive-developmental perspectives might engage in meaningful conversations and collaborations. We stated repeatedly in our original article, and we can only repeat here, that our proposal is designed for those who believe it would be profitable – both conceptually and empirically – to find a way to unify the two theoretical

approaches. Our proposal offers nothing to those who would continue to insist on the hegemony of one theoretical approach over the other, even as represented in Sokol and Martin's 'separate but equal' effort. The two perspectives do have, as stated, 'genuine differences in how they understand and approach the phenomena in question.' Our point has been that how one understands and approaches a phenomenon in question is contextualized by ontological and epistemological metatheoretical principles. Some metatheoretical principles foster an exclusive stance towards phenomena (i.e., split metatheory), while others foster a more inclusive stance (i.e., relationism). A careful look at an inclusive stance that offers a unification of two broad areas of research interests, while maintaining a difference in perspective, may, just may, be of value to some. We recognize, however, that there are those who will not find value in any such unification. These include: those dedicated to a hegemony of behavior-analysis, those dedicated to a hegemony of the cognitive development, and also those dedicated to operating within the postmodern idiom, which includes the proposition that any movement towards integration or unification in any arena represents an attack on individual freedom as a 'totalizing (or tyrannical) force.' For us, however, scientific advancement entails both integrations and differentiations, not as competing alternatives but as an identity of opposites.

## References

- Bickhard, M.H. (2004). Process and emergence: normative function and representation. *Axiomathes – An International Journal in Ontology and Cognitive Systems*, 14, 135–169.
- Gadamer, H.G. (1989). *Truth and method* (2nd, rev. ed.) (J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall, Trans). New York: The Crossroad Publishing Corp.
- Overton, W.F. (1991). Historical and contemporary perspectives on developmental theory and research strategies. In R. Downs, L. Liben, & D. Palermo (Eds.), *Visions of aesthetics, the environment, and development: The legacy of Joachim Wohlwill* (pp. 263–311). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Overton, W.F. (1998). Developmental psychology: Philosophy, concepts, and methodology. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & R.M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Theoretical models of human development: Vol. 1. Handbook of child psychology* (5th ed., pp. 107–188). New York: Wiley.
- Overton, W.F. (2003). Development across the life span: Philosophy, concepts, theory. In I.B. Weiner (Series Ed.) & R.M. Lerner, M.A. Easterbrooks, & J. Mistry (Vol. Eds.), *Comprehensive handbook of psychology, Vol. 6. Developmental psychology* (pp. 13–42). New York: Wiley.
- Overton, W.F. (2004). Embodied development: Ending the nativism-empiricism debate. In C. Garcia Coll, E. Bearer, & R. Lerner (Eds.), *Nature and nurture: the complex interplay of genetic and environmental influences on human behavior and development* (pp. 201–223). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.