

CBT and philosophy: Revisiting the critical appraisal of ACT

“More adequate for the human condition” ?

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The critical appraisal of ACT

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ACT, philosophy, truth

- ACT = “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy”
- in the framework of CBS = “Contextual Behavioral Science”, supposedly “a science more adequate to the challenges of the human condition” [1]
- referring to a supposed “pragmatic truth criterion” that is claimed to be “in the tradition of William James” [2]

Points of critique

- ACT’s philosophy of science is unusual and problematic in its views on accountability, truth, and rationality [...]. Truth, knowledge, and what exists are rendered as matters that are up to the individual and their goals [3]
- Several other points concerning methodology and other issues.

Reply [in same issue]

- Gave sensible replies to most criticisms.
- Called the critique of the relation to truth “grotesque misunderstandings.”

Revisiting the critical appraisal

[Mattes, 2026]

The alleged pragmatic truth criterion

- is *not the usual notion of truth*,
- is *not compatible with William James* notion of pragmatic truth
- is *not even pragmatic by its own standards*
 - likely to be harmful with respect to the publicly stated goal of CBS,
 - and of little if any benefit.

ACT vs. truth: A grotesque misunderstanding?

- Handbook of CBS: the truth criterion is “successful working.” (p.44)
- ACBS website: ACT emphasizes workability as a truth criterion, and chosen values as the necessary precursor to the assessment of workability
- PBT book: Truth is [...] the extent to which a particular analysis occasions “successful working” or is considered “viable.” (p.29)
- ACT book:
 - “Truth [...] is defined [!] by whether a particular activity [...] helped achieve a stated goal” (p.31)
 - “Truth of this sort is always local and pragmatic. *Your* truth may not be *mine*” (p.33)

This philosophy has “no place for reality and truth.” [4]

The human condition

includes:



images: wikipedia

Too much respect for truth?

“One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much [...] indifference to how things really are” [5]

Bias and self-deception

- Human information processing is subject to a lot of biases.
 - Bias is mostly bipartisan. [6]
 - Bias blind spot: Not seeing one’s biases
- Especially for what is taken as morally salient
 - “As the moralization of an attitude increases, so do evaluations of pro-attitudinal scientific knowledge and expert recommendations, suggesting that moral conviction may make people less critical information consumers” [7]
- Hypocrisy is commonplace [8]

Relativism and science-denial

- “positive correlations between belief in (subjectivist) truth relativism and bullshit receptivity and conspiracy ideation” [9]
- “Beliefs reflecting higher epistemic relativism were associated with lower support for democracy and trust in electoral results.” [10]
- “Motivated postmodernism” [11]
- Disregard for truth is contagious, e.g.:
 - Information about dishonesty of other people increases dishonesty [12]
 - Spill-over from postmodernism to right-wing politics [13]
 - from postmodernism to Hindu nationalism [14]

ACT vs. truth: Does it matter?

“Those outside of the CBS community are sometimes worried about its expansive goals and enthusiasm,” as Hayes et al. themselves admit.[15]
• Could there be reason to worry? For example:

ACTing today like Skinner 1976?

- Hayes et al. link ACT and CBS to Skinner’s Walden 2. [15], [16]
- In the 1976 preface to “Walden 2 revisited”, Skinner endorsed Mao’s China and referred to Lenin for how much suffering one can [!] impose on the now living.[17] And suffering they (Mao, Lenin) did impose. [18]
Skinner, Hayes, et al. may be well-intended, but that is not enough: Reality matters!

All you need is Love and Enthusiasm?

In her study of medieval inquisitors, the historian Karen Sullivan[19] wrote:

- the inquisitors determined, not to await, passively and patiently, the conversion of individual souls, but to pursue, actively and impatiently, the protection of the social group. (p.7)
- If there is one pattern in medieval accounts of the inquisitor by himself or by his peers, it is that he pursues heretics out of love (p.5)

Goodwill, love, enthusiasm, are important, but in themselves do not suffice: They need to be checked against reality and truth.

Notes and References

- Main reference: Mattes, J. (2026) Revisiting the critical appraisal of ACT and functional contextualism. *the Behavior Therapist*, 49, 31-48.
- [1] Introductory article in the inaugural issue of JCBS: Hayes, S. C., Barnes-Holmes, D. & Wilson, K. G. (2012c). Contextual Behavioral Science: Creating a science more adequate to the challenge of the human condition. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 1, 1 – 16. Underlining added.
- [2] `in the tradition of W.James (1907)` Hayes, S. C., Pistorello, J. & Levin, M. E. (2012b). Acceptance and commitment therapy as a unified model of behavior change. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 40, 976-1002
- [3] O’Donohue, W. (2023). The scientific status of acceptance and commitment therapy: an analysis from the philosophy of science. *Behavior Therapy*, 54, 956-970. Underlining added.
- [4] Barnes-Holmes, D. (2000). Behavioral pragmatism: No place for reality and truth. *The Behavior Analyst*, 23, 191-202. Underlining added.
- [5] p.1 and p.33 in Frankfurt, H. (2005). *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press.
- [6] Ditto, P.H., Liu, B.S., Clark, C.J., Wojcik, S.P., Chen, E.E., Grady, R.H., Celniker, J.B., & Zinger, J.F. (2018). At Least Bias Is Bipartisan: A Meta-Analytic Comparison of Partisan Bias in Liberals and Conservatives. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14, 273 – 291; . and discussion. Bowes, S.M., Clark, C.J., Conway, L.G., Costello, T., Osborne, D., Tetlock, P.E., & van Prooijen, J. (2025). An adversarial collaboration on the rigidity-of-the-right, symmetry thesis, or rigidity-of-extremes: The answer depends on the question. *Political Psychology*, 47.
- [7] Bayes, R. (2026). Seeing the same evidence differently: Biased assimilation and moral conviction in public evaluations of scientific expertise. *Political Psychology*, 47.
- [8] Batson, C. D. (2015). *What’s Wrong With Morality? A Social-Psychological Perspective*. Oxford University Press.
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- [11] Clark, C.J., Kerry, N., Grašo, M., & Tetlock, P.E. (2025). Morally offensive scientific findings activate cognitive chicanery. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1552, 148 - 164.
- [12] Gerlach, P., Teodorescu, K. & Hertwig, R. (2019). The truth about lies: A meta-analysis on dishonest behavior. *Psychological Bulletin*, 145, 1-44.
- [13] McIntyre, L. C. (2018). *Post-truth*. Cambridge: MIT Press. Chapter 6.
- [14] Nanda, M. (2025). *Postcolonial Theory and the Making of Hindu Nationalism: the wages of unreason*. Abingdon, Oxon : New York, NY : Routledge. p.17; see also p.5: “By indicting the conceptual categories of modern ways of knowing [...] the Postcolonial Left has issued a blank check to those clamoring for a return to the Great Hindu Civilization.”
- [15] ACT book, p.373.
- [16] Hayes (2016). Why Contextual Behavioral Science Exists. in: Handbook of CBS, p.10.
- [17] “China may be closer to the solutions I have been talking about, but a Communist revolution in America is hard to imagine. It would be a bloody affair, and there is always Lenin’s question to be answered: How much suffering can one impose upon those now living for the sake of those who will follow? And can we be sure that those who follow will be any better off?” [Skinner, B. (1976) Walden Two Revisited. New preface to Walden Two. Reprinted in 2005, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., pp.xv-xvi.] Skinner wrote this in the year Mao died—so Skinner should have known what that meant → see [18].
- [18] Dozens of millions starving under Mao’s “Great Leap Forward”, the atrocities of the “Cultural Revolution”, the Khmer Rouge genocide, etc.etc. See, e.g., Lovell, J. (2019). *Maoism: a global history*. Knopf; Yang, J. (2012). *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958-1962*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Cruvellier, T. (2014). *The Master of Confessions: The Making of a Khmer Rouge Torturer*. New York: Ecco.
- [19] Sullivan, K. (2011). *The inner lives of medieval inquisitors*. University of Chicago Press.