

## A Behaviouristic Basis for an Ethic\*

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I propose an ethic which states that it is unethical for anyone to reinforce any human behaviour which does not contribute to the survival of humanity or, at the very least, is not inimical to it. Such an ethic is based on the position that human behaviour is a function of ontogenic and phylogenetic contingencies of selection. This position is one of the cornerstones of radical behaviourism. What is conducive to the survival of the species is no particular behaviour in any and all circumstances but stimulus control of many classes of behaviour, particularly those which have long-term consequences.

I will, in this brief paper, propose an ethic rooted in radical behaviourism. Therefore, I much characterize that term. In its most general sense radical behaviourism is a critique of traditional ways of explaining behaviour and an attempt to clarify the nature and purpose of a scientific analysis of behaviour. It is, then, a philosophy of psychology. More specifically, it is the philosophy of that special discipline of psychology called experimental analysis of behaviour (Skinner, 1974, pp. 7-8). In the context of the present topic its significant facets are these: Radical behaviourism argues that the problems facing the world will be solved only if we improve our understanding of human behaviour; that

such improvement requires the rejection of the concept of autonomous man and of mentalistic and other "inner" causal accounts of behaviour, and the replacement of such accounts with one which explains behaviour in terms of phylogenetic and ontogenic contingencies of selection.<sup>1</sup> What this means, practically, is that for human behaviour to be changed the environment on which behaviour depends must be changed. Contingencies of selection must be brought to bear differentially on various classes of behaviour.

Now, the commitment to contingencies of selection by radical behaviourism implicates survival as a value (cf. Skinner, 1974, p. 205). I submit, in fact, that the *ultimate* value in a behaviouristic ethic is the survival of the species. The word, *species*, implies the survival of some species' members, of *individuals*; the word, survival, implies *effective behaviour* of those individuals. Those groups of individuals within the species characterized by a given culture, i.e., by some given set of practises, will tend to outsurvive those with a different set of practises (cf. Skinner, 1953, pp. 430-436). Survival of the species is *ultimate* because, if the species does not survive, if there are not at least two individuals around (preferably a breeding pair), matters of *individual* rights and conflicts of values simply do not arise.

If this reasoning is acceptable, the ethical standard against which the practises of radical behaviourists must be evaluated has

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<sup>1</sup> For a modern and comprehensive treatment of radical behaviourism see Skinner, B. F., *About Behaviourism*. New York: Knopf, 1974. For a less technical treatment see especially chapters 1 and 6 in Skinner, B. F., *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. New York: Knopf, 1971. The reader familiar with Skinner's extensive writings will note their pervasive influence throughout this paper.

to be cultural effectiveness in aid of the survival of the species.<sup>2</sup>

The ethical principle, therefore, around which the radical behaviourist's practises, and everyone else's, should revolve is this: Within certain constraints, it is *unethical* for anybody to provide what would be reinforcing to anyone — client, patient, student, citizen — *without* making such provision *contingent* on behaviour which, in one's judgement, conduces to such cultural effectiveness or, at the very least, is not inimical to it.

We have recently been confronted with a "finding," the outcome of a 60-million dollar experiment on the effect of a guaranteed minimal income. It was conducted in the United States, in Seattle, Washington and Denver, Colorado, over a 10-year period for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare by the Stanford Research Institute of Menlo Park, California. The findings, said Daniel Moynihan, in a distressing display of obfuscation, "challenge the popular notion that a guaranteed income doesn't act as a disincentive to work and that it strengthens the family bonds." Translated, Moynihan's statement must mean that the income given decreased work and dissolved families — assuming, of course, proper experimental controls, the reliability of the *Washington (D.C.) Post* and the *Denver Post*, etc. (And let us not forget problems of unexplained variance.)

Moynihan, a United States Senator from New York, is said to have lamented the findings but still supports a minimal-income program. He is quoted as saying, "... any new program must be tailored to take into

account what the . . . experiment showed" (*Denver Post*, 1978).

Well! I should hope so. How likely is it that a reduction in productive work and the dissolution of the family constitute effective cultural practises which will be conducive to the species' survival? To expand a point of Skinner's (1975, p. 633) ethical professional practises or, for that matter, ethical practises of citizenship, are not practises in which we *give* people what they need; they are practises which arrange that the things people need figure as reinforcers in effective contingencies.

Merely to give people what they need is to say that what they *do* does not matter. To say that nothing matters is to say that anything goes. To put it categorically, the fundamental premise of a behaviouristic ethic is that *people's behaviour matters differentially!*

I have implied that there are certain classes of behaviour which conduce to the survival of the species, and that these are the ones we should strengthen or construct. We could, of course, reinforce any behaviour at all so long as we judge such behaviour not to be inimical to survival-effective cultural practises.

The bolder course, however, is to make use of all the evidence we can find to show us what threatens survival, what behaviour has deferred aversive consequences, and to give direction to a specification of classes of behaviour to be strengthened because they *are* conducive to the survival of the species. But Stolz and her associates say in *Ethical Issues in Behaviour Modification* that, though "Ideally the goals of intervention would be selected so as to be congruent with the long-term good of society as a whole . . . in practise there is no way to determine either what the long-term good of society is or what impact any immediate decision will have in the long run" (1977, p. 22). Must we accept this disclaimer?

Granted that absolute certainty is a chimera, are we really so impotent? Is the enormous output of the scientific enterprise really mute in this regard? Are we so committed to analytic interminability that we can never draw conclusions? Are we to be indentured to an unbridled individual-

<sup>2</sup> I mentioned this central thought to an ethological friend who remarked that it seemed to be at variance with the modern biological view that evolution does not proceed for the benefit of the species. Now, the persuasive major thesis of sociobiology is that insofar as any behaviour reflects some genetic contribution, individuals tend to act to maximize their own individual reproductive success. (Any benefits to the species are byproducts.) But, since we are here concerned with social ethics, I think that the only response to the remark is to paraphrase what Katherine Hepburn said to Humphrey Bogart in the movie, *The African Queen*: Individual reproductive success, Mr Olnutt, is what we are put on earth to rise above. (See also Wynne-Edwards, 1972.)

ism? Do we really doubt that we should strive to build a culture, a social environment, that brings behaviour under the control of long-term consequences? Is there truly no way to determine what those classes of behaviour might be (cf. Skinner, 1953, pp. 430-436)?

I suggest that we pay attention to the data from such fields as climatology, ecology, anthropology, sociology, agronomy, economics, biochemistry, genetics, neuroanatomy, physiology, geology, experimental medicine, ethology, etc., as well as to the data of experimental and applied behaviour analysis. Information about the deferred aversive consequences of man's present behaviour and suggestions for alternative ways of life come from all of these sources and from literature, philosophy, theology, what have you. "Thar's gold in them thar hills." There is, of course, also a monstrous amount of useless rock from which the gold must be separated. But let us not despise wisdom.

To be fair, I must now say that Stolz and Associates suggest, in the interest of ethical protections, that those involved in "intervention" should specify, as best they can, the reinforcers for their own behaviour and that: "The professional and the professional's employer *might*, for example, specify their system of values and attitudes relating to the client's problem (1977, p. 22; italics mine, CLR).

I suggest that the radical behaviourist should absolutely so specify and not *just* in the context of formal therapeutic or other professional relationships, but in all aspects of his or her life. I further suggest that radical behaviourists might well agree on the ethic to be specified. Put another way, could that ethic be part of what it means to be a radical behaviourist?

In an article called "The Organism as Host" (1976), Donald Baer offers the engaging metaphor that a person may be regarded as host to a large number of guests, the person's behaviour patterns. We may respect the host while being appalled by some of its guests. Since the laws of behaviour are statements of relations between the guests and their causes, we may remove some of the guests and provide others without denigrating the host. And

we need, Baer points out, "a systematic understanding of the consequences *for the host* of having one set of guests rather than another" (p. 91). What sorts of guests is it desirable for a host to have?

Baer and his co-thinkers, Jan Roosa and David Thomas, suggest one set of guests which they consider nearly always useful. I see the set as absolutely central to the ethic I have suggested. Baer calls it contingency-outcome prediction skills, skills in predicting what the long-term consequences of any response will be.

I would formulate this concept a little differently: skills in discriminating conditions under which given behaviours are appropriate from those where they are not. Skills in predicting long-term consequences of behaviour would seem a subset of the more general class. In any event such skills imply no particular *behaviour* in any and all circumstances, but stimulus control of many classes of behaviour with such labels as analytic, synthetic, and divergent thinking; improvisation; creativity; productive work; commitment, perseverance; restraint. The stimuli controlling these behaviours must, in part, be the data and recommendations from the disciplines listed earlier.

Baer also suggests some other classes of behaviour which may be universally useful for the host, which usefulness I extend to society as a whole, and which I also see as major subclasses of the more encompassing discrimination skills class stated earlier.

One may be called health skills and includes such subclasses as diet practises, exercise, rest and the like. Another, Baer labels counter-modification skills, consisting of a knowledge of behaviour-modification techniques and some methods of defending one's guests against efforts to change them by the guests of other hosts. These may be as close as we can come to specifying classes of behaviour which conduce to the survival of mankind. Substantial thought about and continuing analyses of them are essential — functional analyses in terms of both the specifiable variables on which they depend, and the function they may serve in the survival of mankind. (It seems to me that Edel's views have something in common with the points made in this paragraph and,

indeed, with the major thrust of this paper. See Edell, 1955, esp. p. 121.)

My statement of an ethical principle was this: Within certain constraints, for anyone to provide what is reinforcing to anybody — client, patient, student, any conspecific — which, in one's judgement, conduces to cultural practises in aid of survival of the species, or, at least, is not inimical to it, is *unethical*. At least two more issues can be raised about that statement. First, the question of "judgement" will be raised. The standard critic will ask, "Who is the radical behaviourist to decide on what to reinforce?" The answer is this: I do not suggest that radical behaviourists arrogate to themselves special powers of apprehension and judgement. The radical behaviourist is neither more nor less qualified than any other scientist, scholar, or informed citizen who learns to evaluate data, predictions, and recommendations coming from other informed citizens, scholars and scientists. Such people act, so to say, as advisors to the behaviourist who is necessarily aware that his or her behaviour modifies the behaviour of his or her client, patient, student or neighbor. As the geologist is in the best position to judge the effect on fossil-fuel reserves of fossil-fuel usage, so the behaviourist is in the best position to judge the effect on fossil-fuel usage of changes in the contingencies of reinforcement in which such usage is embedded. Behaviourists are, presumably, those least ignorant of the processes, relations, and facts which constitute the content of behaviour analysis and the implications of *that*. But, the data and recommendations of these advisors must be among the discriminative stimuli controlling the recommendational and reinforcing practises of radical behaviourists. Of course, through ignorance or ineptitude, behaviourists may certainly err. Their best judgement may be, like everyone else's, an educated guess. To the extent that they do not have solid evidence on all points they guess in terms of the best evidence they have — and it is reasonable that such guesses should have an edge over recommendations of tender-

minded provenance, at variance with or ignorant of the experimental and applied analyses of behaviour.

About 125 years ago Oliver Wendell Holmes said this: "It is so much easier to consign a soul to perdition or to say prayers to save it, than to take blame on ourselves for letting it grow up in neglect and run to ruin . . . The limitations of human responsibility have never been properly studied."<sup>3</sup> Thus, of course radical behaviourists have the credentials to play a role in the design of effective cultural practises. Who better than those who study behaviour in terms of the variables of which it is a function; those, in short, who address directly the limitations of human responsibility, and who find traditional views of responsibility not to be useful formulations.

And now to the second question. In suggesting an ethical principle, I began with the phrase: Within certain constraints . . . What are those constraints? They are the constraints of knowledge (or ignorance), and the rules of our society at any given time. We must all of us use what we know about shaping and fading to modulate our insistence on contingencies, in other words, to tell us *how*; what we know about development to tell us something about *when*; what we know about a person's current repertoire to tell us *whether*. We may rely on our present societies' laws and constitutions to tell us *never*. Many of these rules are there, after all, to protect us hosts, and for that reason we must obey them. Also, laws are a marvellous stimulant to imaginative improvement. If time-out rooms are proscribed because of fire laws, some ingenious behaviourist invents the time-out ribbon. *But*, we may indeed disagree with the law. Then we *must* work to change it.

I think we may heartily agree with Goldiamond's point that the safeguards provided Americans by the Constitution of the United States make an excellent guide for the "development of an effective application of behaviour analysis to problems of social concern" (1974, p. 4), while recognizing that no set of conduct rules, with a few exceptions such as the *Ten Commandments* and the *Book of Mormon*, is held to

<sup>3</sup> Somewhere in Holmes' writings. I'm blessed if I can remember where.

be graven in stone.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes codes are part of the problems of social concern.

If, in my country, the United States of America, our rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are abrogated. The Declaration of Independence tells us, it is our right, indeed our duty, to throw off the abrogating government (cf. Goldiamond, 1974). I suggest that it is likewise the duty of a radical behaviourist, indeed of any person, to refuse to be party to any interaction where his employer or client or any conspecific desires outcomes at variance with the ethical principle stated earlier.

It is said that there are three fundamental questions in Ethics: What is *good*? Why *be* good? *How* be good? I have specified some behaviours we should consider Good, in terms of both our own professional practises and what we should strive to engender in others. The Good is practises which conduce to the survival of the species. I have said *why* we should engender such practises. If the species does not survive there *are* no other ethical issues. And, finally, I think we know enough about controlling variables, little as that still may be, to make real contributions to teaching ourselves and others to *be* good. And THIS is a special contribution of Radical Behaviourism.

I am doing nothing less here than proposing that we strive to create a culture based on the ethic outlined in this presentation, because people so acculturated have a better chance of surviving than those who accept too many things as "O.K." — those who say what people do does *not* matter. If such a proposal is deemed audacious, arrogant, presumptuous, then so be it. I am in very good company. (See references, especially Michael, 1977.)

But there is a spectre here and I will close with a brief consideration of it. If we behaviourists believe *we* "know" *what* is good, and why we should *be* good, and *how* to be good, will we be *allowed* to be good? There are many people "out there" who also believe they know what is good and

why it's good (and who may even agree with us on these points), but who leave "how to *be* good" to "will power", "moral force", "a sense of responsibility", exhortation, and/or various forms of brutality. This is what makes the difference: the radical behaviourist advocates an *effective* "technology of teaching": the differential reinforcement of desirable *behaviour*.

But there are more mentalists and advocates of autonomous man than there are radical behaviourists, so behaviourists must hope that Napoleon was not necessarily right in saying that God is on the side with the big battalions. In any event there are more battalions of mentalists than of radical behaviourists and those battalions are arrayed behind the walls of credulity. Behaviourists will not prevail in a frontal assault. Behaviourism must continue its siege and mine away at those walls. Behaviourists must continue to persuade, to argue, to debate, to reinforce appropriate behaviour, to stress principles, not just procedures, and, most of all, to provide data. In short, behaviourists must educate.

Whom must behaviourists educate? Statistically speaking behaviourists are not likely to have much impact on the well-established members of the four estates. The latter will not readily give up the gay apparel of mentalism for the almsman's garb of a functional analysis. Nor will they easily foreswear the "literature of freedom and dignity" for the unsettling, stark and thrifty prose of B. F. Skinner, nor even for the ardent representations of Jack Michael, the relentlessly reasoned arguments of Israel Goldiamond, nor the graceful lucidity of Donald Baer. The technical literature, of course, is incomprehensible to them and radical behaviourists do not seem to be in demand as scientific advisors to governments. But, the students of today become the legislators, the constitutional lawyers, and the nine old men<sup>5</sup> of tomorrow — and the next day, and the next.

In the meantime, when we despair that the Stockholm Conferences of the world, in their various guises, will ever listen to a radical behaviourist, we can wryly take solace from the words of the heavenly choir in *Faust*, which I have perverted to my

<sup>4</sup> In the case of the *Book of Mormon*, golden plates actually.

<sup>5</sup> The Supreme Court of the United States of America.

purposes: Whoever strives with fervent will, the data can deliver.

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