Part XIV: Naturalistic Ethics

25. Naturalist Ethics

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What is the reason for the oft-noted difference between human progress in science and the abysmal lack thereof in solving social and political problems? Perhaps a fundamental distinction between scientific and ethical knowledge bears responsibility. Science involves matters of empirical fact to which all must accede while ethics deals with values over which there is not only general disagreement, but also no means for achieving consensus. Therefore, thinkers have long sought ways to derive an ethical system from factual matters of science, to deduce what one *ought* to do from what *is* the case, to distill evaluations from descriptions. In this tradition of naturalist ethics, Skinner (1953, Ch. 28; 1971, Ch. 6) contributes a version based on his behaviorist vision of society. His proposed science of ethics, supported by his science of behavior, promises to resolve ethical questions by the objective, empirical, and naturalistic methods of science. My purposes are threefold. First, I shall explicate what I take to be Skinner's Naturalist Deduction, that is, his methods for deriving ethical judgments from statements of scientific fact. Second, I shall examine what this Naturalist Deduction does and does not accomplish. Third, I shall elaborate on his behaviorist ethics.

THE NATURALIST DEDUCTION

Skinner's analysis begins with the observation that generally the things people tend to call 'good' are positive reinforcers, defined as stimuli which strengthen the behavior they follow. Among these positive reinforcers Skinner distinguishes two types: those which are reinforcing for an individual and those which are reinforcing for members of society in general. For example, lying in a particular instance may be reinforcing for an individual who therefore calls it 'good', but the other members of society not reinforced by this individual's lying will instead call honesty 'good'.[1] In addition, Skinner notes, some things, not necessarily reinforcing to the individual or to others, are also called 'good', namely, things which contribute to the long-term survival of the culture.

Let us define the property *R* as the property of being (1) reinforcing to the individual *or* (2) reinforcing to others *or* (3) contributory to the long-term survival of a culture. Skinner's analysis appears to show that goodness can be identified with *R*. Since *R* is a natural, empirically observable property, the good can be scientifically determined. Questions of value can be settled empirically by science, in particular by the science of behavior which specializes in studying reinforcement and cultural survival.

Because Skinner's ethical system allows the derivation of '*X* is good' from '*X* has *R*', it is a naturalist ethics in one important sense. There is, in addition, a second sense in which it is a naturalist ethics. The derivation of '*X* is good' from '*X* has *R*' is mediated by a suppressed premise:

For all *X*, *X* is good if and only if *X* has *R*.

Let us call this premise, the essence of Skinner's ethics, the 'Naturalist Principle'. This Naturalist Principle is a value judgment; it tells us what is good. What is the justification for the Naturalist Principle? If the Naturalist Principle is itself derived from scientific matters of fact as Skinner implies, then his ethical system is naturalistic in what I shall term the 'strong sense' (see Frankena, 1939, for a discussion of the different senses of naturalism). This derivation of the Naturalist Principle from matters of fact is what I call the 'Naturalist Deduction' which can be reconstructed roughly along these lines:

1 People say '*X* is good' if and only if *X* has *R*.
2 Therefore, *X* is good if and only if *X* has *R*.
3 One ought to do the good.
4 Therefore, one ought to do *X* if and only if *X* has *R*.

In this derivation, the conclusion (4), an ought-statement, is derived from the first premise (1), an is-statement in the form of an empirical description, although currently only a plausible hypothesis. The derivation is mediated by (3), a tautology. The second premise (2) is, of course, the Naturalist Principle, and it is derived from (1) by a suppressed premise to the effect that if people correctly use the word '*W*' to refer to *Y*, then the meaning of '*W*' is *Y*. One could, along with G.E. Moore (1903/1966, p. 12), question this derivation of (2) from (1) and ask whether the fact that people *say* something is good necessarily implies that it *is* good, but this is not my present concern, and I will grant the derivation (for a fuller discussion see Hocutt, 1977).

What I do wish to examine is a striking paradox in Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* and the implications of this paradox. As shown above, Skinner's Naturalist Deduction begins with an observation about verbal behavior, about how people emit the word 'good'. However, the book is not merely, or even chiefly, a dispassionate analysis of behavior. Instead, it is a remarkable appeal for *changes* in human behavior. Skinner urges his readers to adopt forms of action to promote the survival of the human species. Most of the book is an elaboration of what these actions are and how certain traditional ideas have impeded their adoption. The paradox is this: on the one hand, Skinner takes our normal use of the word 'good' as definitive and as the basis for his notion of good, but on the other hand, he uses his notion of good to argue for a change in our use of 'good'. If Skinner accepts verbal behavior as it is, then all he can do is describe it and not

evaluate it. If, on the other hand, he uses his science to evaluate and promote a change in verbal behavior, then the justification for his value judgment must come from a source other than verbal behavior as it is.

CONFICTS AMONG VALUE COMMUNITIES

One possible resolution to this paradox is to suggest that Skinner is not making a value judgment, but is rather clarifying matters of fact. Perhaps he is merely explaining the consequences of various courses of action so that speakers have more accurate information about the *R* properties of the options available to them. Given this information, people will adopt the social practices Skinner advocates.

This suggestion, however, does not resolve the paradox. It is clear from the widespread reaction of the readers whose behavior Skinner is trying to change that the conflict between him and his critics is not over consequences or other matters of fact. The most poignant illustration of this is seen in the response to Skinner's (1953) suggestion: 'A scientific analysis may lead us to resist the more immediate blandishments of freedom, justice, knowledge, or happiness in considering the long-run consequence of survival' (p. 436). Skinner's critics respond that they would prefer not to survive if survival means giving up the values, such as freedom and justice, they most highly cherish. Survival for its own sake possesses little value for them. Their disagreement with Skinner is not over matters of fact.

Disagreements of this sort do not, in themselves, undermine the Skinnerian analysis of behavior. They are explained in terms of histories of social reinforcement. Skinner's critics come from communities in which behavior, including verbal behavior, contributing to freedom and happiness is highly socially reinforced, while Skinner and his supporters belong to communities in which behavior promoting cultural survival is highly socially reinforced. Hence the groups differ in what they find reinforcing and therefore good. Each group constitutes a 'value community', each with its own contingencies of social reinforcement.

Indeed, a good number of the important moral and ethical dilemmas facing us today (e.g., abortion, pacificism, homosexual rights, affirmative action) are not primarily disagreements about consequences and other matters of fact but represent clashes among conflicting value communities. In such cases it appears that all a science of behavior can do is confirm that each side of a moral conflict acts in ways that are reinforcing to it, but the science cannot tell us which side is correct; it cannot tell us what we ought to do (cf. Hinman, 1979). The science cannot appeal to survival as a criterion to decide among differing points of view because the survivability criterion is precisely what is at issue. People do not, in fact, currently use survivability as the ultimate criterion to decide ethical questions, as Skinner admits. Therefore, a naturalist ethics based on empirical observations of behavior cannot justify survivability as a criterion to resolve ethical questions (Waller, 1982; but cf. Rottschaefer, 1980).

INTRA-INDIVIDUAL CONFLICTS

What is true for conflicts between members of different value communities is also true of conflicts within an individual. In making an ethical decision an individual will normally have available many courses of action, all of which have *R*. There will be many options that are personally reinforcing, many that are reinforcing to others, and some which contribute to cultural survival. Although (4), the conclusion of the Naturalist Deduction, purports to give necessary and sufficient conditions for what one ought to do, clearly it fails to give sufficient conditions since conflicting actions have *R*. But unless there is some means for choosing among the options, Skinner's naturalist ethics cannot fulfil its promise of empirically determining what one ought to do.

Several methods for resolving such conflicts immediately suggest themselves. Perhaps, for example, one ought to choose the action that maximizes one's reinforcement. But this solution raises a host of empirical and theoretical questions. First, there is the issue as to whether organisms necessarily do whatever maximizes reinforcement (see Commons, Herrnstein and Rachlin, 1982). According to the Skinnerian experimental analysis of behavior, an organism's response is always the result of a history of reinforcement. So in one sense the organism is always doing whatever behavior has the greatest response strength, i.e., has had the greatest past reinforcement. Consequently, Skinnerian ethics has no role, since individuals already and necessarily do the good, ie., that which maximizes reinforcement.

On the other hand, if it is possible for organisms to act in ways that do not maximize their reinforcement, Skinnerian ethics may play a role in guiding behavior. Then the question is how to quantify reinforcement and which dimensions to maximize. Although this is an unanswered question of great complexity, let us grant for the moment that it can be answered. To be ethical, then, one ought to act in ways that maximize reinforcement. The critical question for my purposes is: what is the source of this rule? It is not derived from observation of behavior, because by hypothesis we have assumed that people do not necessarily maximize reinforcement (Waller, 1982). Even if it could be so derived, it still does not uniquely specify what one ought to do. Besides the course of action which maximizes the individual's reinforcement, there is also the action which maximizes reinforcement for other members of the community, as well as the action which maximizes the culture's chances of survival. How ought one to choose among these?

I do not deny that rules, in fact, reasonable rules, can be formulated to decide these questions (see the debate between Graham, 1977, 1983, and Garrett, 1979, on this issue). My point is that whatever these rules, and however sensible their rationale, their source must be other than the observation of how people currently use the words 'good' and 'ought'. Therefore, these rules do not constitute a naturalist ethics in the strong sense.

For Skinner one source of ethical rules is a prediction about behavior. He argues that those societies which adopt practices which promote cultural survival will be the ones that will survive in a kind of cultural form of natural selection among societies. Therefore, he claims, in the future cultural survival will be the ultimate criterion for choosing among actions which have *R*. However, if and when Skinner's prediction is fulfilled, the Naturalist Deduction will have no role.

People in this future society will already and necessarily act in ways to promote the survival of their culture. To be sure, a science of behavior can clarify for them which practices are likely to be effective in this regard, but it cannot justify the survivability criterion before such a criterion is adopted.

Therefore, it appears that the Naturalist Deduction cannot achieve what many had hoped it would be: a guide to action. If it takes as initial premise (1) the verbal behavior of some future society as predicted by Skinner, then it will advise that society to do what it is already and necessarily doing. If it takes as its initial premise (1) *current* verbal behavior, then it cannot include strict rules for choosing among goods. Without these rules it can give necessary but not sufficient conditions for the good, and it, therefore, fails to tell us what we ought to do. If, on the other hand, the ethical system includes these rules, then it is not based on the Naturalist Deduction. It may be a very appealing and reasonable system, perhaps even a morally good system, but its justification is not based on empirical fact. It is a behaviorist ethics but not a naturalist ethics in the strong sense.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Another way to see that the Naturalist Deduction provides only necessary but not sufficient conditions for what one ought to do is to consider differences among individuals. Something might, for example, be a reinforcer for the behavior of an Eskimo, or a masochist, or a cat, but most people will not call it good. Yet this fact contradicts the initial empirical premise (1) of the Naturalist Deduction. To save (1) it is necessary to relativize it to individual histories of reinforcement. Thus, (1) should be revised to:

5 For any speaker S, S says 'X is good' if and only if X has R for S.

This revision requires a modification of (2), the Naturalist Principle:

6 X is good relative to S if and only if X has R for S,
and a revision of (4):
7 S ought to do X if and only if X has R for S.

The phrase 'relative to S' in (6) is ambiguous. It might mean that it is good for S to do X, i.e. S's doing X is good. Under this interpretation, consider a particular person P, and assume an act Q which has R for P. According to (6), P's doing Q is good. However, if we substitute 'P's doing Q' for X in (5) we get:

8 For any speaker S, S says 'P's doing Q is good' if and only if P's doing Q has R for S.

But from (8) in conjunction with (6) all that follows is:

9 P's doing Q is good relative to S if and only if P's doing Q has R for S.

Thus, the fact that a particular act Q has R for a particular person P does not imply that P's doing Q is good. Whether or not P's doing Q is good depends on the speaker making the ethical judgment. If P's doing Q has R for the speaker S, then S will judge it to be good, otherwise not. Thus, it is incorrect to interpret 'relative to S' in (6) as meaning that it is good in some absolute sense for S to do X.

Another interpretation of 'relative to *S*' in (6) is that *X* is good *according* to *S*, i.e., in *S*'s view. Under this interpretation, however, problems arise in deriving (7) which does not follow from (5), (6), and (3). To deduce (7), (3) must be revised to:

10 One ought to do what is good in one's own view.

But (10) is certainly open to debate and is not, at the very least, a tautology. Without (3), (7) is not derivable, and the Naturalist Deduction collapses.

LIMITS OF THE NATURALIST DEDUCTION

Several points emerge from these considerations. First, if the Naturalist Deduction refers to current verbal behavior, then its conclusion gives us necessary but not sufficient conditions for what we ought to do. Second, the Skinnerian ethical system with its emphasis on the survivability criterion is either a prediction about the future or it is a recommendation by Skinner, not a naturalist deduction from a behavioral science. Skinner (Rogers and Skinner, 1956) readily admits this: 'Do not ask me why I want mankind to survive. I can tell you why only in the sense in which the physiologist can tell you why I want to breathe' (p. 1065). In dealing with the question: 'why should I care whether my government survives long after my death?' Skinner (1971) answers: 'The only honest answer to that kind of question seems to be this: There is no good reason why you should be concerned, but if your culture has not convinced you that there is, so much the worse for your culture' (p. 137). If contributing to cultural survival is what Skinner recommends, that is, what he finds to be good, then from (8) we can conclude that for him actions which contribute to survival are reinforcing. This is because of his own reinforcement history and because of the contingencies of social reinforcement in the value community formed by him and his supporters.

Returning now to the paradox described at the beginning of this chapter, we see that *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* is not merely an empirical analysis but is indeed a book of ethics. It is an attempt to change our behavior by telling us what we ought to do. To understand how this is possible, I wish to suggest a behavioral analysis of the verbal behavior of making ethical judgments.

BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS OF ETHICAL JUDGMENTS

One of the most important discriminative stimuli for human behavior is the verbal behavior of others. When a speaker tacts (Skinner, 1957, Ch. 5) stimuli in the environment, this verbal response may function as a discriminative stimulus for the non-verbal behavior of the listener. For example, the verbal tact, 'It is raining', on the part of a speaker may set the occasion for the response of getting an umbrella on the part of the listener. People learn to emit verbal behavior which brings about behavior on the part of the listener which is reinforcing to the speaker. In forms of intellectual self-management and self-control, the speaker and listener may be the same person.

Tacts are not always effective in bringing about listener behavior which is

reinforcing to the speaker. For example, the tact, 'It is raining', will not bring about any behavior on the part of the listener unless the listener has a conditioning history in which that tact, or similar ones, played a role in a contingency of reinforcement. Therefore, speakers can make their verbal behavior more effective in controlling the behavior of the listener by emitting a verbal response which functionally establishes a contingency of reinforcement. This can be accomplished by tacting a contingency. For example, the speaker may say, 'If you take an umbrella, you won't get wet.' This verbal response, which I shall label a 'contingency establishing verbal response', is more effective than 'It is raining' in bringing about the desired behavior on the part of the listener because it specifies both the desired behavior and the reinforcing consequence for the listener. In Skinner's (1969, Ch. 6) analysis such verbal responses are 'rules', 'warnings', or 'advice'.

Although a tact of reinforcement contingencies is an improvement, it still has certain weaknesses. For one thing it will succeed in bringing about the desired behavior only if the consequence specified is indeed a reinforcer for the listener. If, for example, staying dry is not a reinforcer for the listener, the warning will have no effect. Similarly, the effectiveness of the warning depends on the listener's states of satiation and deprivation with respect to the specific reinforcement.

A more powerful controlling stimulus would be a verbal response which establishes a contingency virtually independent of the listener's idiosyncratic history of reinforcement and drive states. An analogy with Skinner's concept of the generalized conditioned reinforcer is helpful here. Skinner (1957, pp. 52–4) introduces this concept to describe a conditioned reinforcement, such as social approval, which has been associated with so many different unconditioned reinforcers so many times, that it is effective regardless of the subject's motivational states and reinforcement history. It is a kind of universal reinforcement. Analogously we might speak of a '*generalized* contingency establishing verbal response' which has been associated with so many contingencies of reinforcement so many times that it is effective in establishing such a contingency regardless of the listener's motivational states and reinforcement history.

The most common form of generalized contingency establishing verbal response is the ethical or moral imperative. 'You ought to do *X*' does not specify a particular contingency of reinforcement, but it functions to establish a generalized one. Doing what one ought to do has been associated with many reinforcers, including social approval, escape from punishment, and other rewards. Therefore, it is extremely effective in establishing a contingency of reinforcement. Its effectiveness is enhanced by the fact that because of its association with many powerful reinforcing and aversive stimuli, it probably functions also as a Pavlovian conditioned stimulus to elicit autonomic emotional responses in the listener.

The more generalized the contingency, the more the verbal response enters into the realm of the ethical and moral. 'You ought to eat at Gino's if you like Italian food', is a contingency establishing verbal response, but the behavior and reinforcement mentioned are specific, and consequently the advice can hardly be called ethical. In contrast, 'You ought to be kind' establishes a contingency with a generalized reinforcement and response, and it is ethical in nature. There is thus a continuum between the purely prudent and the purely ethical depending, in part, on how generalized is the contingency established.

IMPLICATIONS

This behavioral analysis of value judgments clarifies several points about behaviorist ethics. First, note that in an ethical imperative, 'You ought to do *X*', there are *two* reinforcements involved. One is the reinforcement, specific or generalized, entering into the contingency for the listener. The other is the listener's behavior, specified in the contingency, which is reinforcing to the *speaker*. Indeed, the verbal behavior of telling others what they ought to do is maintained by the resulting listener behavior which is reinforcing to the speaker.

Second, if it is true that ought-statements are maintained in this way, then we have a behavioral analogy to the traditional distinction between 'ought' and 'is'. It has often been claimed that an ought-statement cannot be deduced from an is-statement. The latter kind of statement is analogous to the tact which, in a sense, describes stimuli. As argued above, a pure tact is not effective in modifying the behavior of the listener without a contingency of reinforcement. An ought-statement establishes such a contingency of reinforcement, and it therefore controls behavior. However, it does not merely describe, or tact, this contingency because a pure tact is maintained solely by generalized reinforcement (Skinner, 1957, pp. 81–90), while an ought-statement is maintained, in addition, by the listener's behavior which is reinforcing to the speaker. Therefore, the ought-statement has characteristics of a mand. Thus, the distinction between 'is' and 'ought' is reflected in the difference between a pure tact and a contingency establishing mixed tact-mand (Skinner, 1957, pp. 151–2; and see Day, 1977, and Begelman, 1977).

Because the ought-statement retains some of the characteristics of the tact, it is also descriptive. It describes a contingency of reinforcement, generalized or specific, and it can do so accurately or inaccurately. Therefore, an ought-statement can be true or false in the Skinnerian sense of truth: it can lead to either effective or ineffective behavior on the part of the listener (see Zuriff, 1980, for a discussion of Skinner's view of truth).

Third, if it is true that ought-statements are maintained by listener behavior that is reinforcing to the speaker, then it follows that people will not consider something ethical unless they are reinforced by it. Compare this conclusion with (5) which states that people call something good if it has *R*, and *R* refers not only to the property of being reinforcing to the individual, but also to that which is reinforcing to others or contributory to the survival of the culture. It appears from the present analysis that when people call something that is either reinforcing to others or contributory to cultural survival 'good', they do so only if it is also personally reinforcing to them, perhaps because the good of society and its survival are personally reinforcing to them. Thus, *R* can be reduced to the one quality of being personally reinforcing (cf. Graham, 1977).

CONCLUSIONS

We can now pull together the strands of the current discussion and evaluate the accomplishments of Skinnerian ethics. First, Skinner provides a behavioral interpretation (Zuriff, 1985, Ch. 10) of the behavior of making ethical judgments. This interpretation consists of a number of plausible empirical hypotheses based on an

extrapolation from behavioral laws discovered through the Skinnerian experimental analysis of behavior. Second, Skinner offers a prediction, also extrapolated from his experimental analysis of behavior, as to what will come to be the values of society in the future. Third, Skinner, in addition, makes recommendations about what ought to be our culture's current values. These recommendations, as opposed to his predictions, are not derived from the science of behavior and are, therefore, not a naturalist ethics in the strong sense. Only if his recommendations were to be adopted would we have an ethics in which ethical questions can be answered by the objective and empirical methods of science. Currently, his ethics are a 'redefinitional naturalism' (Harmon, 1977, p. 20) in which a precise naturalist system is suggested as a replacement for our present vague one.

Although Skinner's ethical recommendations are not a logical deduction from the behavioral science, they perhaps are related to that science in another way. In a behavioral interpretation science is seen as the behavior, verbal and non-verbal, of scientists. These scientists form a community, both a verbal community (Skinner, 1957, Ch. 18) and a value community. It is possible that exposure to the contingencies of reinforcement prevailing in this community leads one to espouse the values Skinner proposes. This shaping of value judgments might come about partly as a result of the contingencies of social reinforcement practiced by scientists. However, these social contingencies are only secondary, and are, of course, themselves in need of explanation. Perhaps the more basic contingencies arise in the very study of behavior itself. Scientists may come to value the survival of their culture and their species when they discover the beauty, the adaptiveness, and the potential of human behavior.

NOTE

1 Strictly speaking a reinforcement is a stimulus not a response, and it reinforces behavior not persons. However, for the sake of convenience I shall speak of a behavior as reinforcing for persons. By this I shall mean that (1) a person's behavior is followed by a reinforcement, or (2) a person's behavior is a reinforcing stimulus for another person's behavior, or (3) the stimulus consequences of a behavior are either conditioned or unconditioned reinforcers, and the behavior is 'self-reinforcing' (see Vaughan and Michael, 1982).

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