

## *[Column 4 Set 2]* **Exploring More Mysteries of Living: Reinforcers Produce Values**



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*Why these Columns?* Because human behavior causes global problems, and solving these problems requires changes in human behavior... So *everyone* benefits from knowing something about the natural science of human behavior that these columns describe. See the 72 columns of the first set, in the *Explaining Mysteries of Living* book or on **BehaviorInfo.com**, for the *basics* of this science.

This column begins our coverage of initial scientific answers to some of humanity's ancient but as yet inadequately answered questions. Like love, back in column 27 of the first set, these topics face traditional opposition to the notion that science can address them. A sequence of topics becomes our first focus. The full interrelated sequence covers reinforcers, values, rights, ethics, and morals.

Those topics appeared several times in the 72 columns of the first column set, because they relate to the success we can have regarding sustainability and human civilized survival. The whole sequence received some summary attention in column 67 of that set.

We start covering that interrelated sequence with a discussion of values. To set the stage, the concepts of values, rights, ethics, and morals in this sequence relate to each other in a crescendo of complexity. For thousands of years, these topics have evoked questions and discussions among humans. While the answers we consider here are not extensive, they are at least scientifically informed.

Values come first, because they tie these concepts directly to easily measurable variables in the prevailing contingencies. Values connect with reinforcers, a common topic of early columns, and at the heart of behavior-controlling contingencies. Basically, our reinforcers are, or become, our values.

The things that we value are the things that we need, appreciate, hold dear, maintain access to, and so on. Experimentation with many explicit stimuli that meet these descriptions shows them actually functioning as reinforcers, with the descriptions actually added after such functioning.

We often confront a relatively simple stimulus circumstance, such as needing to discover

a stimulus that will serve as a reinforcer to improve the behavior of, for example, a poor and hungry student. This circumstance evokes our asking this seemingly small question: “What reinforces this student’s behavior?”

With some observation we may discover an accessible and affordable stimulus type or two that serves this function and so answers this question. The answer also tells us something about what the student values, although as values, reinforcers can become rather more complex.

Let’s say that a broader set of stimuli (which we need not specify here) evokes our asking this seemingly bigger question: “What are this student’s values?” With some observations, we may discover and make a sizeable list of her values. When we examine the list, though, we find that it contains the names of numerous stimuli (e.g., as objects, events, circumstances, processes) that also function as reinforcers for her behavior (or yours or mine).

The list starts with food and money. But at the other end, the list might include love, world peace, and sustainable living for all. For simplicity, we focus on the start of the list. For what poor and hungry student would money and food not serve as reinforcers? (Perhaps you thought that by “poor” I meant that the student was incompetent or lazy, rather than “impecunious.”) A similar comment applies to the more complex values at the other end of the list.

Between food and sustainable living, a wide range of additional stimuli could appear on this values list, including current and historically based stimuli, all of which could also function as reinforcers for the student’s behavior. For example on the list we could find comfortable living quarters, honest friends, fair and capable professors, politicians with integrity, a quiet place for study, a sophisticated computer, a good sound system, and lots of music to play.

We might also find various opportunities for the student on the list, such as opportunities to craft, participate in, or attend entertaining events (e.g., concerts, operas, plays, films) plus opportunities to practice fun or practical skills. These could include her musical instrument playing skills that band-related contingencies originally conditioned in middle school, or her target-shooting skills that team-participation contingencies originally conditioned in high school, or hunting skills that regular field trips, with extended family members, originally conditioned, trips that put food on the table and in the freezer.

We might even find on the list a big, strong, excessively safe vehicle that runs reliably although with poor gas mileage. Apparently for this student the necessary social conditioning has not yet made a personally smaller carbon footprint into a reinforcer. All these things could comprise a portion of the student’s values, a portion of her reinforcers.

Now look over that list again. The seemingly bigger question (i.e., “What are the student’s values?”) is essentially the same as the supposedly smaller question (i.e., “What reinforces the student’s behavior?”). Both questions concern both the student’s reinforcers and the student’s values. These are the same, which applies for everyone. How many or few items appear on such a list is of little importance.

The reinforcers are the things that they and we value and, conversely, the values are our and their reinforcers. You can see this by making some more lists. Make lists both of the

full range of stimuli that reinforce your behavior, and of your values. And make similar lists about a friend that you know well, and about someone you know poorly, and about the members of some thematically related group of people (e.g., sharing contingencies concerning conservation).

You will find that the lists of what they value repeat the lists of their reinforcers. *Values are reinforcers*. Follow behaviors with the things people value, and you will find those behaviors occurring more often. Their reinforcers are their values.

As an observation, you may also note that the length of those lists gets shorter if you make them in the order that we described. You are intimately familiar with a long list of your values, and the values of your friends, values that you likely share. However, you can spot only a few of the values of persons whom you know poorly, and possibly you can recognize only the main, and shared, value of a thematically specified group of people.

That main value, the main thing that reinforces the individual behavior of all of the members of the group, likely appears in the group's name. For example, what is the main value—the main thing that reinforces the behavior of all the members of the group—for the group that calls itself the *Death with Dignity Alliance*?

Alternatively some people define a value as the *behavior* that produces a reinforcer. This makes one's values the behaviors that produce one's reinforcers. By our first definition, if a small carbon footprint is among the stimuli that reinforce your behavior, then one of the things you value is a small carbon footprint. By the second definition, one of your values would instead be the behaviors that produce a small carbon footprint.

Values as *behavior*, however, carries a danger. The causes of the behavior remain neither specified nor implied. What if the same scientifically uninformed cultural conditioning, the kind that includes agential behavior accounts, causes the “values as behavior” statement? Then the term *value* ends up referring to something that an inner agent possesses.

In the usual agential accounts for behavior, the agent (of whatever sort) then directs the body to behave in ways comporting with the possessed value or value characterizations. We of course exorcize the inner agent as scientifically unworthy, and reject the fictitious accounts for behavior. Hence my preference for our definition of values as reinforcers. This definition applies as we move our discussion on to rights and ethics and morals.

Before moving on, however, recognize that we only consider the values that are *unconditioned* reinforcers as inherently valuable, in the sense of “absolute.” These include stimuli necessary for individual and species survival (e.g., food, water, even sex) yet even these have at least partial exceptions, as we will see.

Absolute, then, merely refers to the unconditioned origin of the value. Other values gain their status as values through the conditioning process, the pairing that conditions the reinforcing function of otherwise non-reinforcing (i.e., initially neutral) stimuli.

That process makes these stimuli function as *conditioned* reinforcers, and thereby also makes them values. But they are values in the sense of conditional or *relative* values, because without the pairing, they function neither as reinforcers nor as values. This

difference will soon show up in the dichotomy between *absolute* and *relative* rights, ethics, and morals as well. We consider rights next time.

You can find the mentioned columns, 27 and 67, most easily in the book, *Explaining Mysteries of Living*. The BOOKS page at [www.behaviorology.org](http://www.behaviorology.org) has a full description of this book.

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