

[Column 7 Set 2] Exploring More Mysteries of Living: Power Plays Violate Ethics



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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.

The last column ended by describing some connections between operant (and respondent) conditioning and ethics, via rights and values. These included added reinforcers, and the subtracted reinforcers that occur as the reduction of negative emotions after stimuli evoke successful escape from unethical behavior.

Those interconnections show that, as with all other behavior, ethical behavior is a function of the variables operating in past and present contingencies, both operant and respondent. This is part of why behaviorology also functions as a *natural science of philosophy*, the rubric under which most ancient-question topics often appear, an area made up of verbal behaviors with which behaviorology deals.

No mystical accounts achieve status as relevant explanations of values, rights, or ethics. The same applies to morals. Before we move on to that topic, however, consider an additional and common aspect of ethics. Most of our discussion so far pertains to ethics among people with fairly equal peer status. But what about ethics when some of those involved hold power of some sort over the others?

Remember, ethics concerns respecting the rights of others, respecting the others' claims to unhindered access to their values, unhindered access to the things they value, their reinforcers. But those holding power could easily be in a position, unethically, to disrespect the rights of those under them.

They can exert disrespect simply by arranging or allowing interference with the rights of others, without the circumstances affecting their own rights. Or they can exert disrespect by arranging or allowing interference with the rights of others in ways that enhance their own access to their own reinforcers, which comes under the label, "conflict of interest." What can prevent such power plays?

Prevention stems from the ethics inhering in appropriate but competing contingencies (e.g., *requirements* to respect rights to privacy). These enable society's access to the variables that could prevent unethical power plays. We may not yet have enough appropriate but competing contingencies in place. News media regularly report on bosses taking advantage of subordinates.

The variables that induce the overriding, nearly abstract, but insufficiently powerful ethics against such power plays reside in the resulting general social contingencies. These variables include, and generalize from, examples such as virtually everyone's experience of someone who holds power over them having behaved in ways that violate their rights, usually but not always in small ways. The size, small or not, cannot prevent calling such behaviors unethical.

Such unethical behaviors can range from an older teenage sibling having fun teasing you by hiding your glasses (which we might hesitate to call unethical, but it is) to a manager applying subtle pressure to get a subordinate to pick up the tab for lunch, to a boss setting sexual favors as the price for promotion.

The contingencies of nearly everyone experiencing those sorts of power-play circumstances induce people in general to reject the behavior comprising such power plays as broadly (and bordering on abstractly) "unethical." Most governments enact laws against the most severe power-play forms. Some governments even enact laws against the less severe forms.

While those laws add an additional layer of consequences to violations, society's usual ethical training avoids most violations. This conditioning leaves stimuli indicative of a beginning violation eliciting negative emotional reactions. Escape from these aversive reactions hinges on the occurrence, instead, of behavior consistent with society's general ethics.

Thus the contingencies induce some resistance to taking advantage of power relations, especially to enhance one's own reinforcers, at the expense of others by violating their rights. Most professions have ethical standards as well as requirements for ethics courses, or continuing education about ethics, to assure the maintenance of ethical behavior and the conditioning effects that produce it.

Moving into, and beyond, the area of "society's general ethics," however, actually moves us into the topic of morals. When the legal kinds of ethical countercontrols prove inadequate to ensure compliance, society begins to call upon morals and morality to take up the slack. Unfortunately, shifting the label on a behavior from "unethical" to "immoral" not only enables quite a helpful increase in enforcement powers, but also enables the rise of some dangerous opportunities for coercion and abuse that also deserve the unethical or immoral label, which can get confusing, as we shall see.

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