

[Column 8 Set 2] Exploring More Mysteries of Living: View Morals With Moderation



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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 previous column considered ethics and their connection to rights. This column turns to morals and their connection to ethics, all as part of the connected sequence of reinforcers, values, rights, ethics, and morals. Morals, however, confront us with an unhealthy aspect, a danger at the end of this sequence, from morals engaging other variables whose presence causes troubles.

With complex topics, repetition can bring benefits. So, the term *values* refers to reinforcers. The term *rights* refers to access to reinforcers that are values. And the term *ethics* refers to the behaviors of respecting rights claims for unfettered access to valued reinforcers. Next in this reinforcers–values–rights–ethics sequence is the concept of *morals*, a term that refers to ethics that have become “abstractions.” Here *abstraction* means something that cannot stand alone, as we will gradually see. As abstractions, morals may lose some important connections with the contingency realities that otherwise ground values, rights, and ethics.

Ethical behaviors not only respect others’ rights claims but also, as contingency processes generalize their scope, some aspects of them take on the status of *characteristics* of stimuli, especially characteristics that cannot stand alone. Our verbal conditioning then evokes our speaking of this new status as *abstraction*. This phenomenon exceeds the usual conditioned reach of our “ethics” term, and so evokes a different term. The conditioned term for ethics at an abstract level is *morals*, akin to the “redness” of our next, simpler, example.

Increasingly complex contingencies regularly make functional stimuli out of stimulus characteristics that cannot exist alone. The conditioning that produces abstraction, however, operates long before ethical conditioning reaches abstract levels. For example, early conditioning leaves various behaviors of children under the control of colors.

Colors are characteristics that *together with other characteristics* can comprise a stimulus, but a color itself cannot stand alone.

Just ask someone to hand you a red, and only a red, but not a red this or that. A red “this or that” shares the characteristic of “redness” *with other characteristics* that together make a stimulus that they can hand to you (e.g., a red hat or a red bowl). But the redness cannot exist alone.

Even when speaking about this, we respond differentially. When conditions evoke our verbal behavior about this characteristic appearing *along with* other characteristics, we say “red.” But when conditions evoke our verbal behavior about this characteristic hypothetically standing *alone*, we say “redness.”

When a stimulus characteristic cannot exist alone, when it can have no real existence apart from other stimulus characteristics, we then apply the term *abstraction*. In this example, *redness* is an abstraction. You can extend this pattern to a vast list of stimulus characteristics, any of which, when they cannot stand alone, we call abstractions.

Here is an example of ethical conditioning that reaches the point at which ethics become abstract and so evoke speaking of morals. When you were young, your parents might have started with the admonition not to tease your brother; treating your brother poorly constituted unethical behavior. Additional ethical training produced the ethical behavior of treating all family members well, which later extended, by processes like generalization, to people, and pets, in the neighborhood, school, city, and so on.

At that point treating any of these poorly constitutes unethical behavior. If this pattern of conditioned ethics continues to extend, it could reach the point where it becomes the abstract admonitions that treating well every living organism everywhere is *moral*, and that harming any living organism anywhere is *immoral*.

Such training (i.e., conditioning) extensions convert concrete ethics into abstract morals. The problem is that morals, being abstract, try to stand alone, like redness, but are thus overextended and thereby disconnected from their origin contingencies, leaving little or no room for relevant exceptions.

The abstraction that turns such ethics into morals often instantly raises virtually unresolvable problems. As but one small example, the ethical conditioning of most people leaves them thinking that their use of antibiotics, to save the life to which they have a right, is ethical, because it respects their rights claim to the valued reinforcer of a cure for an infection threatening their life.

But their ethical conditioning could extend to an abstract, moral level, like the abstract moral that “treating well every living organism everywhere is *moral*, and that harming any living organism anywhere is *immoral*.” That might then make them think that their use of antibiotics is immoral, because it requires the destruction of the living micro organisms responsible for the infection.

While such conundrums must leave us wary of morals, even better reasons exist for wariness. Some problems of the jump from ethics to morals partially derive from the conditioning of stimulus connections between morals and other abstract terms. This conditioning makes the word “moral” evoke responses, including emotional responses,

similar to those that the word “goodness” evokes. This stands in contrast to the responses that the word “badness” evokes, which in turn are similar to the responses that the word “immoral” evokes.

All of those are abstractions. They cannot exist apart from more specific stimulus characteristics. For example, just what (i.e., what stimulus) is it that has the “goodness” or the “badness?” Further extensions carry on to related word dichotomies, such as acceptable and unacceptable, allowable and disallowable, tolerable and intolerable, and not punishable and punishable.

Our conditioning further leads us to respond to the stimuli controlling those morals–related dichotomies as intrinsic qualities. This distinguishes them from ethics, because we respond to behavior as ethical or unethical on the basis of generally extrinsic criteria regarding specific rights claims. We can measure ethical behavior as actually supporting the claims, and we can measure unethical behavior as actually opposing the claims. In either case, the determination of ethical or unethical depends on specific, measurable criteria.

However, conditioning induces us to respond differentially to moral and immoral behavior on the basis of (i.e., under the control of evocative stimuli regarding) whether the behavior comports with some general, intrinsic goodness or badness characteristics respectively, characteristics that conditioning has made functional but that cannot stand alone. This abstract status of morals, as verbal stimuli, somewhat divorces them from the contingencies that generate them. This can lead to problems just as rules (discussed in columns 62 and 63 in the first set of columns) that no longer reflect the contingencies that they describe—because the contingencies have changed—can lead to problems...

As you see, the complexity of morality requires more space. So we conclude our brief discussion of it in the next column.

You can find the mentioned columns, 62 and 63, most easily in the book, *Explaining Mysteries of Living*. The BOOKS page at www.behaviorology.org has a full description of this book.

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