

[Column 9 Set 2] Exploring More Mysteries of Living: Moderation Avoids Morals Fallout



by **Stephen F. Ledoux**

A Los Alamos member of The International Behaviorology Institute

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 began our consideration of morals. This column finishes what we can fairly cover in columns. The last column ended by describing how conditioning induces us to respond differentially to moral and immoral behavior on the basis of whether the behavior comports with some general, intrinsic goodness or badness characteristics respectively, characteristics that conditioning has made functional but that cannot stand alone.

That abstract status of morals, as verbal stimuli, somewhat divorces them from the contingencies that generate them. This can lead to problems just as rules that no longer reflect the contingencies that they describe—because the contingencies have changed—can lead to problems.

As part of looking at those problems, consider another, related result that stands out when we compare ethics and morals. *A change in circumstances*, which we can measure, can lead to a change in our assessment of a particular behavior either from ethical to unethical or from unethical to ethical. Once conditioning processes compel classifying a behavior as moral, however, we continue to respond to the behavior as inherently good *regardless of changes in circumstances*. Similarly, once contingencies establish classifying a behavior as immoral, we continue to respond to the behavior as inherently bad regardless of changes in circumstances.

Now consider that morals can extend to the conditioning of large numbers of people, all of whom can then become involved in punishing “immoral” behavior. However, due to the abstract level, changes that happen in the concrete, ethical contingencies behind some morals often fail to induce respective changes in the related morals. As a result many people end up punishing, as immoral, behaviors that actually are ethical. For example many people currently punish, *as immoral*, behaviors that relate to ethically, humanely,

working to decrease the human population to more sustainable levels such as, for example, advocating reduced support for merely procreative sex.

But circumstances have changed. So the behavior of working to decrease the human population humanely, to more sustainable levels, needs currently to be the moral behavior, for the sake of solving global problems and human civilized survival. For example, more support for same-gender loving relationships that cannot produce babies is now—and should now be—a moral behavior. But instead, many traditional cultural institutions still push, as moral behavior, working to *increase* the human population, which speeds humanity toward species extinction. Such activity now really exemplifies immoral behavior.

As you can see, our scientific principles and practices show that morals may sometimes be “enduring.” But they are not, cannot be, and never were absolute or written in stone.

In addition a moral behavior *always* occurs along with the body that mediates it, so the inherent goodness gets extended to the body through the usual conditioning process of pairing. By the further extension of our culturally conditioned predilection for inner-agent accounts, the now inherent goodness of the body gets even further extended to the “person” whom we then consider as inherently good. This evokes even better treatment for a body’s, that is, his or her, moral behavior.

The same, however, applies to immoral behavior, extending inherent badness first to the body and then to the “person” whom we then consider as *inherently bad*. This evokes even worse treatment for his or her immoral behavior. This shows us the damaging increase in enforcement power to which we alluded earlier.

When reinforcers become dependent on enforcing the status of a behavior that a powerful group considers unethical, that circumstance evokes the groups’ verbal behavior of overextending claims that shift a behavior description from “unethical” to “immoral” for the rest of the culture. Since the immoral behavior remains abstractly bad independently of circumstances, that shift allows, even encourages, more extreme forms of enforcement of the current morality. This opens the door to easy and all-too-often permanent enforcement methods for possibly misconstrued morals violations.

We call them possibly misconstrued, because morals are products of behavioral contingency processes and so are not written in stone. They can become harmful when the contingencies change.

These developments should be raising all sorts of red danger flags for you. Pursuing these flags here, however, would take us to levels of detail inappropriate for a column. Still, such details help clarify the extent of behaviorology’s natural-science analysis of values, rights, ethics, and morals. So I encourage you to pursue them. (For a particularly helpful resource, see Chapter 25 of Lawrence Fraley’s 2008 book, *General Behaviorology: The Natural Science of Human Behavior*. The BOOKS page at www.behaviorology.org has a full description of this book.)

As a final point, presuming some inherent goodness or badness of “persons” also misconstrues “person” as a mystical inner agent (or as a representative of some sort of inner agent). Scientifically we instead construe “person” as the potential and actual repertoires of behavior—for example, knowledge and skills—that a body is capable,

upon occasions of appropriate stimulation, of mediating due to both its genetics and its conditioning history (a future column topic).

Here, however, construing the person as an inner agent shows us a source for some of the common objections to this natural science, behaviorology. With inner agents being discredited, these objections often get miscast first at the level of ethical concerns, and then at the level of moral concerns. The moral-level objection to behaviorology tends to evoke a culture-wide condemnation. However, to the extent that humanity's survival requires behaviorology, a culture-wide moral condemnation backfires.

By definition natural science bars mystical accounts from its explanations, and in behaviorology this means barring inner agents from its explanations of behavior. So anyone whose conditioning has induced accepting inner-agent accounts objects strongly to behaviorology not on some technical or intellectual or scientific grounds but on moral and related emotional grounds.

The claim is, "How dare those behaviorologists set up their natural science against the accepted moral reality of not only our mystical, theological maxi-god that moves mountains but also against our mystical, secular mini-gods that move arms and legs!" These mini gods, of course, refer to inner agents of every sort.

Due to their traditional cultural conditioning, such people see the inner agent as good; after all, it started out as the theological soul before its label changed to the more secular psyche or mind or self or person or personality, and so on. So they see the behaviorologists' scientific exorcism of inner agents as automatically and inherently bad, even evil.

And the traditional morality of good and evil further conditions people to remain good by fighting evil. As was the case with some other scientific perspectives (e.g., Darwin's) the available data suggest that, especially with respect to science, society has still insufficiently conditioned resistance to carrying out that admonition about fighting "evil." This admonition gets carried to unethical, even immoral, extremes when the object of the admonition is not something evil, but is necessary science! Witness, for example, the attacks on natural science in general and on evolutionary biology and behaviorology in particular. We need some survival-enhancing *change* in "morality."

A last example of our sequence of reinforcers, values, rights, ethics, and morals, one having a potentially sizable bearing on our continued survival, can emphasize the interconnections of these topics. This example concerns the value of sustainable living. The conditioning history that turns components of sustainable living into conditioned *reinforcers* provides substantial *value* for our survival. We claim this value as a *right* that deserves *ethical* respect and may even be *morally* correct at this point.

Such possibilities, of course, threaten the mystical and superstitious assumptions about human nature and human behavior that ancient cultural institutions and lore induce as they come to us through generations of traditional cultural conditioning. This conditioning arose from our 50,000 years or more—documented in writing for the last 5,000 years or so—of accumulated verbal conditioning in circumstances that disallowed much thorough reality testing. So now this conditioning includes lots of untestable mystical and superstitious accounts.

Perhaps that conditioning still affects your behavior in some ways, possibly even inducing a negative emotional reaction to discussions of these kinds of topics. I can only hope that the counterconditioning that can accrue from all these columns will prove to be at least a beginning, if not an adequate, intellectual and emotional counterbalance, expanding your knowledge and skill repertoires and altering any negative emotional reactions to positive emotional reactions.

After all, it's science, just science, perhaps vital science for humanity's future. I love science. How about you?

After next considering some of the experimental and practical research equipment, methods, and designs of this science, we will return our attention to the ancient questions about language, discussing it as verbal behavior.

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