Dying Slowly with Compassion and Dignity: A Commentary

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Fraley offers a provocative behavior-analytic perspective on the process of slow death. I argue that the value of his insightful analysis is severely compromised by his insistence on equating behavioral competence with personal worth. Fraley errs by proclaiming that his philosophy is science, that existing social practices are essential human attributes, and that idiosyncratic reinforcing stimuli are universally functional. Further, his philosophical tenet is fundamentally inconsistent with his genuinely humane goal of understanding and promoting protracted dying as a behavioral rather than metaphysical phenomenon.

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Fraley's (1998) thoughtful and thought-provoking analysis of slowing dying demonstrates the conceptual power that behavior analysis can bring to understanding the human condition. In focusing on slow death as a response chain, Fraley conveys the humanity inherent in the scientific perspective that considers humans to be human—nothing more but certainly nothing less. Anyone who has interacted with a slowly dying person will recognize that Fraley's analysis is informed by quintessential human experiences—emotional pain and at times anguish, helplessness and at times desperation. Fraley, indeed, is to be commended for providing a coherent behavior-analytic interpretation of the penultimate human experience. Nevertheless, Fraley severely compromises his analysis by adhering to a dogmatic and unnecessary assumption.

Before discussing this central criticism, I suggest we make a distinction that Fraley fails to advance. When we discuss *slow dying* in the present context, we are referring to what might be called a terminal illness (such as cancer) rather than a progressive illness (such as Parkinson's disease). This dis-

crimination may be important because the course of the terminal illness, particularly in its final stages, is generally more predictable than is the course of the progressive deterioration of a malady like Parkinson's. Both forms of protracted dying involve behavior of the dying person and his or her social environment. Yet the progressive dying process is likely to involve distinctly different behaviors than the terminal scenario (e.g., less pain in some circumstances, plateaus of stable functioning, very gradual behavioral deterioration) and raise issues that differ markedly from those, for example, described as "forcing the 'good show.'" As this topic receives further attention, a more refined situational analysis will no doubt develop.

My very serious concern with Fraley's analysis involves his insistence on equating a person's social worth with his or her behavioral competence, and the consequent relegation of "intrinsic worth" to the prescientific wastebasket ("intrinsic human worth is a hypothetical construct with no basis in reality beyond the behavior said to reflect it," p. 19). Fraley makes two important errors in logic here, with serious consequences that undermine the thrust of his entire argument. First, intrinsic worth is *not* a hypothetical construct. A hypothetical construct is an entity that cannot be directly observed and

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cannot be measured by any one instrument but is inferred through a network of empirically established correlations (see Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Leary, 1995). For example, constructs such as anxiety, intelligence, and self-esteem have no real existence and cannot be seen or measured by one instrument, yet are said to have a certain amount of construct validity because the network of correlations (weak as well as strong) confirms predictions. Thus, a measure of self-esteem may evidence strong positive correlations with a measure of self-efficacy and a measure of academic performance but may show a weak and inverse relationship with a measure of singing ability. Because Fraley equates intrinsic worth with an observable, directly measurable variable (i.e., behavioral competency), he uses intrinsic worth as a philosophical assertion rather than as a hypothetical construct. And philosophical assertions, unlike hypothetical constructs, are *not* subject to empirical verification or falsification. Philosophy is either endorsed or discarded, depending on one's values (reinforcers). This leads to Fraley's second error in logic: His philosophy, for reasons as completely unclear to me now as they were in past arguments (cf. Fraley, 1994b; Rakos, 1994), finds intrinsic worth to be incompatible with behavior-analytic thought, and therefore is a concept to be summarily discarded.

For Fraley, the essence of a person is his or her behavioral repertoire. Most if not all behavior analysts would find little of contention in this assertion. But Fraley then announces "if one's behavior is indeed the essence of one's 'life,' then no two lives can be of equal worth" (p. 20). Fraley argues that because essence equals behavior, behavior must then equal worth. This is a non sequitur, because Fraley first fails to recognize his implicit philosophical position and then compounds this error by confusing an absolute philosophical tenet with admittedly widespread but nevertheless relativistic social practices.

Fraley is correct that the common practice of many, perhaps most, people is to select or "rate" social partners by evaluating behavioral repertoires. Certainly, I am unlikely to invite a behaviorally compromised person, such as a "derelict," home for dinner. However, my avoidance behavior is a function of contingencies of reinforcement, not of the derelict's intrinsic worth as a person. Fraley, on the other hand, sees my "respect" for another as a reflection of the other's worth, when in reality that respect (actually, respectful behavior) is a function of the other's reinforcing value *to me*. Fraley misses the essential concept that the reinforcing value of the other, as with any reinforcer, is idiosyncratically related *to me*. Thus, in an earlier article Fraley observed that "similar contacts with different people result in different degrees of reinforcement, so a worth differential necessarily exists across the range of different persons whom one might contact in a given way" (1994b, p. 46). Of course, another's worth *to me* has nothing to do with that person's worth in the abstract, for it is obvious that a third person and I may judge a target person's reinforcing value very differently. I appreciate sports and you do not, so I value an athlete's skills much more than you do. How do our differences in conditioning history, which result in the athlete being a conditioned reinforcer for only one of us, affect the athlete's worth in an abstract sense? It seems clear that when Fraley defines worth in reinforcing or even economic terms, as with cost-benefit ratios, all he does is elevate *utility* to the position of prime value in his system. But this operation constitutes philosophy, not the identification of an axiom based in a natural science. The transparency of this science is clear, with Fraley's perplexing premise that a "typical rescuer" will save the person whose behavior seems most worthwhile, particularly when this unscientific assertion is supported only by allusion to an anecdote from Skinner!

Because there is no empirical basis

for Fraley's notion of worth, an important question becomes: Why is his philosophical position advanced so strongly? What analytical gains does it produce? Sadly, as far as I can tell, the "behavior equals worth" philosophy provides no substantive insights into and no clarifications of behavioral theory in general or the process of protracted dying in particular. Fraley (1994a) has argued that worth differentials (based on behavior) are "the reality of human social interaction, and [behaviorological principles] are the scientific principles that describe those phenomena in the abstract" (p. 46). But do the principles describe what *is* or what *must be* (no *ought* here!)? Fraley extends this contention by proposing that the "ethic of equality . . . plus the myth of spiritual agency and . . . person-to-body generalization combine to foster a group enforced respect for anything that takes human form" (p. 14), which results in our behaviorally ignorant dying rituals. Certainly, the advocacy of a self or soul and the stimulus confusion of behavior and body raise serious behavior-analytic concerns. In contrast, discarding the "ethic of equality" undermines behavioral philosophy and Fraley's otherwise humane perspective on slow death. If Fraley is correct, and diminished behavioral competencies, particularly nonverbal ones, reflect waning worth, then *why* should we be concerned about easing the suffering of dying persons? Dying persons emit less behavior and, according to Fraley, possess less worth. With less worth, why *not* let them suffer the natural course of illness? Why in this instance—slow dying—should we ignore the functional contingencies that supposedly render these persons less valuable to the social environment? Intervention to ease suffering makes sense only if the worth of all persons, regardless of behavioral repertoires, is considered to be fundamentally and intrinsically equal.

Fraley correctly points out that societal judgments of the value or worth of living entities are made. A murderer

in the United States and a handful of other nations can be executed; those societies deem, through their laws, that the murderer's worth may be below a certain threshold. Yet the actual sentence in capital cases is determined by a multitude of factors, only one of which is worth. We must also note the ethical relativism inherent in capital punishment. The vast majority of countries on this planet have made a very different (and more enlightened) social decision: A murderer, regardless of how heinous his or her behavior and regardless of how devastated are the survivors, has intrinsic worth equivalent to that possessed by anyone else and, consequently, cannot be deprived of life. In a similar fashion, a fetus is not considered to possess worth in many societies until a certain stage of development is achieved (i.e., certain behavioral competencies are potentially present). As with capital punishment, the worth of the fetus is determined through social rather than scientific mechanisms.

Further, Fraley is selective in his analysis of "behavioral worth." He ignores clear instances in which society protects the behaviorally challenged and thereby confirms their worth. The Americans with Disabilities Act, enacted in the mid 1990s, offers a compelling example of a rule designed to counter the contingencies that have naturally evolved. Again, it is society, not individuals, that determines worth in the abstract.

It is true that many social problems remain unresolved, that many people are treated differently, and that some of the different treatments are due to judgments of behavioral worth. This indicates that certain currently functional contingencies of reinforcement have been selected by a culture, and are therefore "correct" in the scientific sense that they are what naturally evolved. But they are not correct in that they are what "had" to evolve, or even in the sense that where we are now in evolution is particularly related to survival of persons, cultures, or

planets. Genetic characteristics are selected naturally, but genetic screening or reengineering might in some instances produce much superior results to the natural course of events. Cloning may ultimately help humans survive better, but cloning is hardly natural. Humans have intervened in genetic selections, and there is no *a priori* reason why humans should not intervene in behavioral selectionism. If many people equate worth with behavior, due to naturally occurring contingencies of reinforcement, a scientific and civilized society might very well consider enacting rules that are designed to counter those contingencies. Isn't one fundamental feature of rule-governed behavior the idea that the proximate functional contingencies frequently reduce the overall reinforcement?

The most unfortunate, and theoretically dangerous, aspect to Fraley's insistence on his rigid and scientifically questionable philosophy is that it justifies widespread prejudice and discrimination. Personal worth that is defined in behavioral terms cannot be meaningfully distinguished from worth that is defined in racial, ethnic, religious, or gender terms, save for the origin of the characteristic (i.e., heredity or learning). Skin color is largely a function of genetic selection, and I presume Fraley would agree that there are no scientific foundations upon which to distinguish personal worth on the basis of that racial characteristic, regardless of the actual practices of any given society or culture. Gender and sexual features are likewise primarily determined by genetics. Sexual orientation is probably jointly determined by genetic and environmental selectionism. Would Fraley, independently of social practices, ascribe differential worth to a person with a penis (or a large penis), with lots of body hair (or sparse body hair), or with an attraction to a member of the same sex (or an attraction to both sexes)? I presume any of these genetically deter-

mined characteristics would not be considered legitimate contributors to personal worth. But do religious responses—which constitute a behavior repertoire determined through environmental selectionism—then become fair game for discrimination, unlike the other more genetically determined characteristics?

Obviously, such a conclusion is ridiculous, but the philosophy that generates it remains dangerous. If worth is determined only by environmentally selected behavioral repertoires, then we are faced with a new and most pernicious "ism." We know that behaviorism currently has an unpleasant connotation to many in society. With Fraley's philosophy masquerading as science, behaviorism will join the litany of other discriminatory "isms"—racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and so forth. Behaviorism, the most egalitarian of scientific psychological perspectives, will become the eugenics of the 21st century. The "scientific" rationale for determining worth, for increasing worth, and of course, for eliminating the unworthy is readily established by this framework.

Skinner (1971) saw the fallacy in notions of ascribed worth: Human dignity is contrived and illusory, because all our behavior is a function of environmental determinism. Thus, from the behavior-analytic philosophy, humans can possess no worth *or* humans can possess intrinsic worth—the philosopher can select his or her philosophical tenet, but in either case *all* humans possess equal worth. Behavioral worth is a characteristic not of the person but of a social labeling phenomenon born of contingencies of reinforcement. Interestingly, most civilized societies today select the Skinnerian position that, philosophically, arbitrarily defined worth is a divisive concept and is incompatible with a harmonious, thriving society. Consequently, rules are enacted, imperfectly, to be sure, to ensure as well as possible that the worth of no hu-

man is judged by his or her skin color, gender, social class, or behavior. A humane society must define the worth of all people as philosophically equivalent.

Thus, we as a society can protect the slowly dying, and ensure that the environment is maximally arranged to support their diminishing capacities, only if we as a society believe that all people—those behaviorally developing as well as contracting, those with untapped behavioral potential as well as those with exhausted horizons—have the same intrinsic worth. Only then can we recognize that we are all products of our environment. To paraphrase an old saying, there but for the grace of contingencies go I.

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