Values and Morality: Science, Faith, and Feminist Pragmatism

Maria R. Ruiz
Rollins College

Skinner's treatment of values and morality has been embedded in his discussions of cultural design (1953, 1956, 1961, 1971). The contributions of other behavior analysts to this discussion have been scarce until recently; but now the dialogue has expanded into a conversation with many voices (Hayes & Tarbox, 2005; Leigland, 2005; Parrott, 1986; Ruiz & Roche, 2007; Staddon, 2004, 2009; Zuriff, 1987). The two papers in this symposium on "Behaviorism: Values and Ethics" by Max Hocutt (2013) and J. E. R. Staddon (2013) highlight the distinctions between a distinguished philosopher sympathetic to Skinnerian behaviorism (Hocutt) and an eminent behavior analyst with a behaviorism of his own (Staddon, 2001). I begin with a review of Hocutt's paper followed by a critique of Staddon. I end my discussion with some suggestions from the literature by feminist pragmatists in the tradition of John Dewey.

VALUES, MORALITY, AND SCIENCE

In his paper entitled "A Behavioral Analysis of Morality and Value," Hocutt (2013) traces the philosophical roots of the debate between realists and empiricists on the meanings of "the good" and "the right" to the Greek philosophers Plato and Pythagoras. He follows with the reincarnation of the debate in the 18th century between the rationalist Immanuel Kant and the empiricist David Hume, pushing the latter line of argument in the naturalistic tradi-

tion forward to more modern times with John Stewart Mill and the contemporary views of B. F. Skinner. Hocutt embraces Skinner's naturalistic ethics and provides a behavioral critique of the *naturalistic fallacy*, the term coined by G. E. Moore describing attempts to derive an *ought* from an *is*. Moore insisted on the separation of kind between empirical facts and values, a move unequivocally rejected by Hocutt and Skinner. Hocutt's essay is a rich, informative, and concise account of the central arguments in this historical debate relating what we can know about goodness and morality and how we can come to know it. These are indeed important epistemological questions that behavior analysts would do well to unpack and appreciate so as to develop a more inclusive understanding of our conceptual framework. It is not enough to know that we are empiricists; we must understand and articulate to ourselves and, especially, to others who are not behaviorists, where our perspective comes from and why we choose it from among alternatives.

Hocutt's analysis begins by considering the empirical unworkability of traditional views on values and morality based on other-worldly standards that make these constructs useless to behavior analysis. Specifically, value in the traditional sense is understood as a quality intrinsic to things and independent of personal desire or action. Hocutt's behavior analysis of values is consistent with Skinner's (1971) observation that "What a given group *calls* [emphasis added] 'good' is a fact: It is what members of the group find reinforcing" (p. 122). The word *good*

Address correspondence to the author at mruiz@rollins.edu.

is a tact; not a thing, which “denotes not a quality but the power ... to reinforce desire [or preference]” (Hocutt, 2009, p. 166). Furthermore, this power is not self-evident but has to be learned from experience. Thus, one cannot know if black beans and rice taste good before one tries this savory Cuban dish. Likewise the traditional understanding of morality or morally correct practice is linked to standards derived from various empirically unworkable sources, including divine law, the authority of the church, one’s conscience or intuition, and others that are often said to be self-evident. Hocutt’s behavioral analysis of morally right practices deals with mores or rules embedded in social context and learned through experience, or, as Skinner (1971) put it, socially reinforced behavior.

Now we might ask, “What happens when an individual or group comes up against a moral dilemma and must decide between courses of action with potentially conflicting outcomes?” Under such conditions our so-called values are said to function as guides for decision making and for coursing through the conflict about right and wrong action. But how do we get these values, and where do they come from? The answers to these questions, of course, depend on whom you ask, as revealed in the words of Hocutt and Staddon in this debate. Hocutt, consistent with Skinner, tells us that the good is what is valued, but it is not equivalent to the right or what is moral for a group, because the latter consists of people-made rules. Hocutt goes on to say that making the good and the right coincide means making rules that promote the good. But how does the good get aligned with the right? Hocutt tells us that only practical experience and empirical inquiry will reveal how. Skinner (1971) agrees and concludes that survival emerges as the ultimate value and criterion for making these decisions. Note that Skinner is not endorsing this conclusion, he is

simply tacting the contingencies as he understands them (see Hocutt, 2009).

But the notion that cultural survival emerges as the ultimate criterion for moral decision making is problematic for some, and I will raise two lines of argument from those critics who challenge it. First I turn to the paper presented by John Staddon in this debate and the ideas that lead him to conclude that this criterion is not workable. I will then turn to the work of pragmatist feminists who follow in the tradition of John Dewey and for whom this criterion is workable within a feminist naturalistic science approach.

VALUES, MORALITY, AND FAITH

In his paper titled, “Faith, Fact, and Behaviorism,” Staddon (2013) begins with the assertion that in the fields of values and moral human action, there are some rules that are valid but their truth cannot be proven; such rules are thus comparable to axioms in mathematics. Staddon rejects the notion, as he has in previous work (Staddon, 2004, 2009), that through empirical inquiry and experience, scientists can best accomplish the alignment of the good (values) with the right (morality) in the interest of cultural survival. In fact, Staddon dismisses scientific naturalism as scientific imperialism and charges it as altogether incapable of having a stake in this undertaking. According to Staddon, scientific imperialism is the unfounded claim that scientific knowing stands alone in its proper claim to validity; that is, science is the only meaningful epistemology. Because the future is unpredictable, we can’t know for certain what will be best for our culture in, say, 200 years, and survival therefore cannot be a guide to action. Staddon goes on to say that if science is to provide any guidance, some values or ideas about good and bad must be added to the scientific facts. But

where, we might ask, do these values come from? According to Staddon they are automatic, and we are capable of discerning them without the need of reflection. Staddon gives us examples of obviously valid moral rules, including don't kill, don't steal, and be honest. There are other, however, less obvious beliefs that can't be proven (e.g., fasting during Ramadan or the positive value of science itself, each of which we must simply take as a matter of faith).

I will raise two concerns with Staddon's analysis and its implications for behavior analysis. Each of these relates to our field's philosophical commitment to radical behaviorism and the conceptual coherence that this alignment affords to all aspects of its practice, from the experimental analysis of behavior to our numerous behavioral technologies. The first is Staddon's separation of values from facts; this is an ontological move that contradicts our philosophical commitment and violates its internal consistency. But beyond this, the empirical and conceptual aspects of scientific inquiry are inseparable and cannot be parsed (see Lee, 1990). In the present case, forcing this separation can open the gates to other forms of dualism (see Ruiz, 1995) and to serious questions about the ontological status of mind in behavior analysis.

The second concern is about what appears to be Staddon's metaphysical quest for certain knowledge in inquiries about values and morality. Staddon speaks about what amounts to intuitive knowing regarding valued truths and moral rules that cannot be proven. This epistemological treatment is in conflict with radical behaviorism's pragmatic understanding of truth and the goal orientation of behavior analysis. Philosophical pragmatists in the tradition of Dewey and behavior analysts in the tradition of Skinner seek justification for their truth statements (Day, 1977; Leigland, 1993; Rorty, 1982, 1999; Ruiz

& Roche, 2007; also see Hocutt, 2009) that explain why they may be desirable within a specific time and place. Justifications are empirical contingency statements about what works in a particular context. They are not statements that claim universally valid truths. Pragmatists, including behavior analysts, recognize that what is true and what works for one group or culture may not do so for another.

VALUES, MORALITY, AND CONSENSUS

Skinner's notion that group or cultural survival emerges as the ultimate value and criterion for moral decision making can be problematic for a feminist analysis of values. For example, the challenges of aligning the good with the right could be insurmountable in a culture in which the dominant group interprets the good (values) as self-evident truths and fails to see how their privileged power and patriarchal values are embedded, indeed hidden, inside such appeals (Ruiz, 1995; Wolpert, 2005). But I suggest that a workable solution can be developed by feminist pragmatists that can actually buttress Skinner's Darwinian-rooted claim about cultural survival. I have argued elsewhere (Ruiz & Roche, 2007) that behavior analysts would benefit from adopting John Dewey's emphasis on pluralism and open inclusive communities as vehicles for building consensus. Charlene Haddock Siegfried (2002), a leading contemporary voice in feminist pragmatism, has identified this emphasis as one manifestation of Dewey's feminist analysis. At the same time, we should recall that Skinner (1971) also recognized the benefits of cultural pluralism and variability in cultural practices, and he warned that "a culture which made people as much alike as possible might slip into a standard pattern from which there would be no escape" (p. 162).

Siegfried (1996) explains that communal consensus "is one of the fundamental values of pragmatist feminist philosophy because social problems require concerted action ... [but she warns that] ... such consensus is temporary, revisable and directed towards specific ends in view" (p. 275). Adopting a consensus-building strategy in cultural design is not just a charitable or political move, but may be the most effective way to delineate problem situations by drawing on the insights of all those who participate or help constitute the situations in question. In the long run, consensus building through cooperative dialogue can lead to open communities that transform and broaden themselves in the process and can contemplate cross-cultural dialogue. One can envision the sharp contrast between consensus-building open communities and separate closed communities, each fighting in isolation for their individual survival.

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