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Why Be Moral: Humanist and Behavioral Perspectives

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Students of philosophy have struggled with the question, "Why should I be moral?" Many diverse theorists have constructed elaborate logical arguments that explain why people in general should behave morally, but have had difficulty explaining why any given individual, safe from detection or retribution, should behave in a moral fashion. To avoid this problem, the notion of a supernatural deity (one who is always watching and thus removes the notion of nondetection and nonretribution) has been introduced by numerous thinkers. Philosophical systems that pride themselves on being based only on natural phenomena, however, can make no such recourse (leading to the charge, particularly from the religious, that without a god concept there can be no morality). Naturalistic humanists and behavior analysts are two groups who have found themselves unable to invoke a deity and thus face the question "Why should I behave morally?" Parallel attempts from both camps will be described and analyzed, with the conclusion being drawn that although such naturalists may not be better off than their more religious friends, they are certainly no worse off.

Key words: morality, selection, behavior analysis

MacCorquodale (1971, p. 13) called behavior analysts "the black sheep" of the family of humanism. Despite their unmistakable roots in the thought of renaissance scientific humanists (Day, 1971), behavior analysts are considered to be intellectual enemies by the majority of those who also currently call themselves humanists. Among these modern humanists, B. F. Skinner's name generally evokes negative responses (e.g., Karl Popper's refusal to sign *The Humanist Manifesto Two* simply because Skinner, "an enemy of freedom and democracy," had already signed). In a review of *The Reluctant Alliance: Behaviorism and Humanism* (Newman, 1992), published in *The Humanistic Psychologist,* Aanstoos (1993) stated that it was unfortunate that Newman had chosen to equate humanism with the philosophy of the American Humanist Association, of which "even B. F. Skinner was a member."

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This hostility can also be felt in discussions of morality. Characterizing the behavioral viewpoint, Ethical Culture Society leader Howard Radest (1989) stated, "simply to equate 'good' behavior with morality doesn't make sense. To approach moral education through behavior raises questions that are unanswerable" (p. 11). Later, he added that "for the behaviorist, morality is an empty category" (p. 62). Lawrence Kohlberg (1983), whose name is considered to be synonymous with studies of moral development, added that Skinner's theories were valid only for "explaining studies of reward in animals and children" (p. x). The obvious implication is that behavior analysis is too simplistic for the much deeper waters of moral development.

That those who concern themselves with the study of behavior are unwelcome in this domain is curious. When discussing morality, we often find ourselves analyzing the intentions of a particular individual. On a deeper level of analysis, however, we are almost always studying moral *behavior,* which is generally overt rather than covert. In

this area, the perennial question "Why be moral?" is a statement that can be expanded to read "Why should people behave in a moral fashion?"

Numerous philosophers, from Hobbes to Freud, have suggested why people in general ought to behave in a moral fashion. The arguments usually make reference to societal breakdown if general moral codes are not observed and the general utilitarian argument that the greatest good for the greatest number is maximized when people behave in a moral fashion. This answer is satisfying to most. As brought out most thoroughly by Nielsen (1989), however, there is a deeper, more troubling, and far more interesting question: "Why should *I* be moral?" Even if we accept the reasoning regarding why people in general should behave morally, we are still left with a question. If (a) there is no possibility of my misdeed being detected, and (b) I will gain by behaving immorally, and (c) I suffer no ill-effects in either the long or short term, and (d) there will be no societal impact of my misdeed, then what justification can be provided to inspire moral behavior on my part? The balance of this paper will consist of attempts to answer this question. Radest (1989), following Plato's example, suggested a dialogue as the means by which moral behavior ought to be explored and understood. As we briefly review the conceptions of several key individuals, we will also make reference to their viewpoints on the function of dialogue in the study of morality.

Paul Kurtz and Corliss Lamont

Paul Kurtz and Corliss Lamont are two thinkers who have made significant contributions to humanist philosophy over the past several decades (e.g., Kurtz, 1986, 1990; Lamont, 1982). Their thinking is as much defined by what they are not as by what they are. They are naturalists. That all references to any supernatural or otherworldly forces are outlawed from their system requires us to stick close to the empirical issues surrounding human behavior.

Over the course of his career, Kurtz (e.g., 1990) has attempted to analyze whether it would be possible to have morality without a deity concept. Kurtz's clear answer is "yes." Religion is seen as no guarantee of morality, whereas an agnostic or atheistic stance is not seen as necessarily leading to immoral behavior. A similar point was made by Schoenfeld:

> None of this is to say that the behavior of "irreligious" persons comprises merely lapses into the nefarious. In their day-to-day lives, these persons can, and usually do, share with the "religious" behavioral governances such as altruism, honesty and sexual morality. (1993, p. 193)

Kurtz advocates the adoption of something he calls "naturalistic ethics," described as "an attempt to provide an empirical basis for ethics, including the definition of ethical terms and concepts" (1990, p. 123). The program calls for ethicists to stay close to the empirical phenomena, an approach he equates with a form of neobehaviorism in that all hypotheses "must be experimentally confirmable and that these verifications must be intersubjectively or publicly repeatable" (p. 65). From these empirical observations, moral truths will become evident:

> If once we reveal the facts of human behavior and anyone still refuses to accept the truth of these facts because he does not have sufficient "reasons" for belief, we might ask him what he means by "reasons," and why anyone should be interested in reasons in his sense of the term. (1990, p. 131)

The obvious objection is that Kurtz is slipping into the "naturalistic fallacy." When one commits the naturalistic fallacy, one makes the leap from "is" to "ought": Humans behave a particular way, and therefore one assumes that humans ought to behave that way. This variation on the "this is the best of all possible worlds" argument is obviously flawed. Human beings commit acts that lead to environmental disasters. Certainly that does

not mean that humans ought to do such things. Kurtz anticipates this objection:

> I simply want to argue that one may analyze human nature, or specify "goods," or recommend action in specific contexts with relative degrees of impartiality—and without committing the "naturalistic fallacy" in its extreme form. (1990, p. 125)
>
> It is possible for naturalists to explain in an impartial way how people behave (defined as value) without making an immediate recommendation for practical behavior. (1990, p. 136)

When we study morality, we are simply studying an aspect of human behavior:

> This position does not unduly flout the traditional meaning of the term "ethics." Indeed, it is consistent with the Greek view of ethics—an attempt to characterize the nature of humankind . . . the definition of value is equivalent to the definition of man. (1990, pp. 137–138)

Despite these lofty statements, it is important to note that Kurtz does not consider moral behavior to have some special status, or to require a special method of inquiry:

> Ethical principles are "naturalistic and empirical phenomena." By this I simply meant that they did not have some mysterious ontological status, nor could they be discovered intuitively. (1980, p. 29)

How then are we to determine what is moral behavior? Kurtz's answer is fairly standard: "An action is deemed good if it maximizes human happiness and minimizes suffering, and evil if the contrary. Moreover, there are standards of fairness" (1986, p. 417). There are also what he calls the "common moral decencies," described below. The judgment of maximization of happiness must be an empirical matter, because we can find "no deductive proof of the 'moral point of view' " (Kurtz, 1980, p. 21). The empirical evidence must then be analyzed. We must use reason and open inquiry in order to arrive at decisions regarding moral behavior. Expressing an appreciation for a "dilemma" approach to moral discourse similar to that advocated by Kohlberg (1983), Kurtz notes that "critical intelligence is the most reliable tool we have—it is not perfect, nothing is when dealing with moral dilemmas" (1989, p. 163).

Kurtz (1980) sees such a stance as a force liberating mankind from the shackles of religious authority. Freedom of thought, or the ability to exercise one's free will, is seen as a Promethean step that will allow humanity to adopt a truly moral viewpoint:

> One is unable to be fully responsible for himself and others, to be creative, independent, resourceful, and free, if he believes that morality has its source outside man. . . . It is not the hope of salvation or fear of damnation that moves us to seek a better world for ourselves and our fellow humans, but a genuine moral concern without regard for reward or punishment. Morality is autonomous. (1986, p. 416)

Lamont, like Kurtz, would be characterized as a humanist. He states that the humanist motto must be "deed, not creed" (1982, p. 25). Expanding the point, Lamont suggests that humanism

> considers all forms of the supernatural as myth . . . [and] believes in an ethics or morality that grounds all human values in this-earthly experiences and that holds as its highest goal the this-worldly happiness, freedom, and progress . . . of all mankind. (1982, p. 13)

As for Kurtz, reason is held up as the highest standard and the means by which solutions to moral puzzles shall be found. Lamont suggests that the humanist "believes that human beings possess the power or potentiality of solving their own problems, through reliance primarily upon reason and scientific method, applied with courage and vision" (1982, p. 13).

A logical outgrowth of this emphasis on reason is that a dialogue is an appropriate way to draft solutions to moral problems. With the additional emphasis on scientific method, it seems that the final products of these discussions would be tentative solutions that would then lead to experiments designed to test the efficacy of the proposed solutions. Although I have accused many humanists of stopping short by failing to accept a science that would provide the means to experimentally test ideas (Newman, 1992), this is the clear implication of the phi-

losophy advocated by Kurtz and Lamont.

Behavior analysts appreciate the empirical orientation of these naturalistic humanist philosophers. Behavior analysts, being a group that tend to be a "gentle people, deeply concerned with the problems facing us in the world today, who see a chance to bring the methods of science to bear on these problems" (Skinner, 1971b, p. 35), also appreciate the obvious concern of the humanists for the solution of practical problems and the maximization of human happiness. What is frustrating to behavior analysts is the reliance on "free will," the autonomous inner being as the source of behavior and thus the emphasis on dialogue rather than experimentation. Both Kurtz and Lamont, like most humanists, are strong advocates of free will. How this free will comes about when scientific determinism is accepted in so many other domains is unclear. Lamont (1982) describes free will as

> an unmistakable feeling at the final moment of significant choice that [one is] making a free decision, that [one] can really decide which one of two or more roads to follow. This powerful intuition does not in itself amount to knowledge, yet cannot be disregarded by philosophers and psychologists. (1982, pp. 162–163)

If we cannot disregard this powerful intuition, we can at least minimize the importance of the distinction between the two systems in our own work. As suggested above, the end of the dialogue must inevitably be a suggestion for a scientific investigation of the dialogue's conclusion. Our time would be better spent getting to that stage, rather than arguing unsolvable philosophical assumptions.

So then, why should I behave morally? Kurtz and Lamont can only answer that it is *reasonable* to behave morally, that it will tend to maximize human happiness and minimize pain. A humanist philosopher who provides a challenge to this viewpoint is Kai Nielsen.

Kai Nielsen

In his book, *Why Be Moral?* (1989), Nielsen has us struggle with the question: Why should *I* behave morally? The answer would be quite simple if there were some objective moral truths in the universe, discoverable by experience or discourse. Nielsen, however, strongly argues that moral qualities are not primary, but are merely secondary qualities ascribed to particular situations by their human observers:

> The moral quality . . . is not something inherent in the act but in reality is simply a feeling in a person with a certain predisposition. We tend to think it is something more but in that we are here simply, though understandably, confused. (1989, p. 8)
>
> In reality all we find are emotions, attitudes, conations and/or social demands resulting (for the most part) from social stimulation. . . . A moral authority or norm, as a reality which is good in itself, is, objectively regarded, something absurd. (1989, p. 17)
>
> If moral propositions can be neither true nor false, then they cannot serve as premises in arguments and thus it is logically impossible for there to be valid moral arguments or any genuine moral reasoning or any discovery or revealing or uncovering of moral truth at all. (1989, p. 16)

Nielsen is working from a humanistic perspective that, like Kurtz's and Lamont's, disallows arguments that rely on a deity or immortality. Finding no objective proof for the existence of a supreme being, Nielsen considers such arguments to be a cheap support for an untenable position: "To postulate God *because* of His practical necessity or to postulate immortality to try to insure a justification of morality is just too convenient. It is deserving of the scorn . . . heaped upon it" (1989, p. 177).

Objectivists such as Plato and Butler would take issue with Nielsen's analysis. They would argue that there are rational means by which to decide what course of action would be more deserving of the adjective "moral." Again Nielsen disagrees, suggesting that the framework from which such a claim is made must be based upon the twin faulty assumptions of objective morality and supernatural standards.

Without either an objective moral reality or a supernatural deity to make judgments, the dialogue approach to morality collapses. Nielsen characterizes the stance one must inevitably adopt when having a moral disagreement with another: "They just have a different moral sense. And we could not, with any nonideological force, claim that they were mistaken" (1989, p. 9). "If someone has a completely different set of attitudes from ours about what is to be done, there is finally no proving him wrong" (1989, p. 203). Plato's argument that immorality must inevitably derive from faulty reasoning is disputed, provided the circumstances mentioned at the outset are present: "The amoralist need not contradict himself in sticking with this stance. All bad fellows, it is sad to note, need not be irrational" (p. 267).

Such a conception flies in the face of much of our cultural mythology and values. Our amoralist, we are sure, will either die in misery like Jacob Marley or see the light like Ebenezer Scrooge. This is no proof of the objective reality of morality, however, because "people react this way because they have been taught or conditioned to so react" (Nielsen, 1989, p. 173). Nielsen finally breaks with Lamont and concludes that "reason and a thorough knowledge of the facts and of theory will not, by themselves, enable us to know what we are to do and what kind of life and styles of acting are required of us" (p. 24). Why should I be moral? Nielsen isn't sure.

B. F. Skinner

The popular conception of Skinner's thought regarding morality is that, somehow, individuals will be conditioned to automatically make the right choices, that is, to behave morally as automatons (e.g., Matson, 1971). The key to the kingdom of *Walden Two* was operant conditioning:

> By this magical technique, applied to all residents from birth, the "Hamlet syndrome" (the anxiety of choice) was efficiently removed. Like that wonderful Mrs. Prothro in Dylan Thomas' Christmas story, who "said the right thing always," so the creatures of Skinner's novel were conditioned to make the right choices automatically. It was instant certitude, at the price of all volition. Like Pavlov's dogs, Skinner's people made only conditioned responses to the stimulus of their master's voice. (Matson, 1971, p. 7)

Due to misunderstandings of Skinner's thought, it is believed that, somehow, behavior analysis has the power to remove the ability of the individual to choose alternative responses. The fear is that Skinner and the behavior analysts have the ability to turn individuals into something less than human, and that morality for the behaviorist consists of simply using the carrot and the stick to create a subhuman lackey. Why the reactions to Skinner and, more generally, to behavior analysis should be so violent was suggested by utopian literature scholar Krishan Kumar:

> It is here that the general humanist critique is most uneasily and most insecurely on the defensive. It seems concerned to preserve a "sacred" area of human life and consciousness from the scrutiny of science. Certain cherished human values—free will, spontaneity, creativity—seem threatened by the scientific approach to human behavior. There appears to be an anxiety that perhaps man will after all turn out not to have the god-like attributes postulated of him. (1987, p. 369)

If one does not subscribe to a free-will conception of behavior, then a very different mind-set is needed for analyzing morality. As an example, an implication of the behavior analytic system is that it is useless in the abstract sense to assess blame or to give credit, because behavior is a function of genetic endowments and environmental influences (see, e.g., *Walden Two* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*). However, the analysis of behavior requires us to perform functional analyses, to seek out the variables that control human behavior. What if experimentation determined that praise or blame were actually the variables that control some behavior? The central point is that before we assess credit or blame, we would do well to examine an individual's environment to see if

these consequences are effective. If such social consequences control some behavior, we may wish to use them. If they do not, then praise and blame are pointless as behavior-change procedures. Moral behavior is seen as being no different from any other type of behavior, it too being selected by its consequences. A functional analysis of moral behavior is necessary to answer the question, "Why be moral?"

According to Glenn (1986), the analysis of moral behavior contains two crucial levels. The first is an analysis of the individual's behavior. What are the contingencies that create and maintain the individual behavior? The second level is that of cultural analysis, called metacontingencies. As described by Glenn,

> The metacontingency is the unit of analysis describing the functional relations between a class of operants, each operant having its own immediate, unique consequence, and a long term consequence common to all the operants in the metacontingency. Metacontingencies must be mediated by socially arranged contingencies of reinforcement. (1986, p. 2)

Metacontingencies are the contingencies that create and maintain the behavior of the many individuals that comprise the culture. The clear assertion is that the behavior of a culture is selected, just as the behavior of an individual is selected. This is the central point of the anthropological school known as cultural materialism. Practices that, in the long run, lead to maximum payoff for the culture tend to be maintained in the behavioral repertoire of the members of the culture, and those that do not drop out. These responses may need to be socially mediated, because the common effect of the response may be weak or highly delayed, but the behavior is still being selected as surely as those responses that we analyze on the individual level are. Coming from such a perspective, the Platonic dialogue is cast in a different light. It is not seen as a forum for rationally convincing other individuals to change their behavior via appeals to sheer reason in the Platonic sense. Rather, the dialogue is conceptualized as a series of contingency-specifying stimuli that can alter the function of discriminative stimuli and reinforcers at the next opportunity to engage in the behavior discussed during the dialogue.

Regarding Skinner's answer to the question, "Why should I be moral?" it is interesting to note that Skinner himself is invoked by Rawls (1971), the well-known ethical theorist, to explain why people are generally moral. Rawls argues that through operant and classical conditioning, combined with highly abstract reasoning, individuals develop a sense of justice that maintains moral behavior in the absence of any other immediate contingencies. Skinner's own answer as to why we should be moral is succinct: "It is a world we have made and one that we must change if the species is to survive" (1989, p. 70). Thus, if we wish to engage in moral behavior, Skinner argues, we must create a world whose contingencies will favor moral behavior.

Unfortunately, the circumstances regarding nondetection and nondetrimental effects described by Nielsen (1989), in effect, promise a complete absence of immediate deterring consequences. Moreover, the consequences for the culture in Glenn's (1986) analysis of the metacontingency are weak; thus the need for social mediation. Provided that Nielsen's and Glenn's requirements are met, in order to avoid invoking action at a distance by relying on highly delayed consequences, when we talk about moral behavior it seems essential that we consider the role of self-managed behavior. A behavior-analytic approach to moral behavior can perhaps be best understood in terms of Malott's (1989) conceptions of rule governance and self-management.

Richard Malott

Three premises are necessary in order to accept Malott's (1989) conception of self-management. First, an in-

dividual must be able to learn a specific rule (a verbal statement of behavior–consequence relations). Second, the individual must be able to self-monitor compliance with the rules. Third, behavior regarding rules must lead to conditioned emotional reactions, based upon compliance or noncompliance with the rules. The last of these develops as the individual experiences a lifetime of external consequences for following stated or written rules. A description of this process was described by Skinner:

> [Breaking a rule] will generate conditioned aversive stimuli and emotional responses . . . which we speak of as shame or guilt. . . . any behavior which weakens the behavior . . . is automatically reinforced by the resulting reduction in aversive stimulation. (1953, p. 230)

Malott provides an example:

> Suppose an expert states this rule: "You need to get your casserole baked in time for your dinner party." That statement probably produces some "anxiety" because of the thought of not being ready for the dinner party; thus the statement of the rule functions as a motivating operation and establishes a direct-acting contingency; that is, preparing the casserole will be reinforced by an immediate and sizable reduction in the rule-induced anxiety. (1984, p. 201)

Malott further elaborates:

> The analysis . . . assumes that the statement of the relevant rule functions to establish built-in or automatic contingencies (Vaughan & Michael, 1982), possibly involving nonverbal aversive states often labeled *fear* or *guilt,* states resulting from our failure to comply with a rule. In addition, the statement of the rule might establish the reinforcing condition of "good feelings" when we do comply. Presumably behavioral consequences associated with these automatic contingencies would have acquired their value as aversive stimuli or as rewards through a behavioral history involving pairing with other aversive stimuli or rewards. (1989, p. 292)

If we accept these premises, then we have both an answer to Nielsen (1989) and a mechanism to explain to someone "Why should I behave morally?" Provided the individual has learned the rules and self-monitors, then compliance will be reinforced or punished with conditioned emotional reactions, either reinforcing or aversive. In this latter case, which Malott states is the much more common one, we behave morally because moral behavior is negatively reinforced. Compliance with the moral rules terminates feelings of guilt or shame that might be generated by immoral behavior, whether it be overt or covert. Nielsen, in a less formalized way, reached toward the same conclusion when he threatened his imaginary amoralist, "You will regret acting this way. The pangs of conscience will be severe, your superego will punish you. Like Plato's tyrant you will be a miserable, disordered man" (1989, p. 185). Quite in contrast to the popular conception of the behavior analyst, the crucial dialogue becomes one that is internal.

Summary

Kurtz suggested that moral responses "are characteristics of human behavior or institutions that have developed over a long period of time" (1980, p. 29). In keeping with the empirical, pragmatic viewpoint of the humanists outlined above, we can only conclude that the moral responses have developed because they have led to favorable outcomes. In other words, as described by Kurtz, these responses have been selected because they serve human needs. Only after they have been selected do we then favor them with the term *moral.*

There are what Kurtz (1989) calls common moral decencies. Among these we find integrity, truthfulness, sincerity, keeping promises, honesty, loyalty, benevolence, nonmalevolence, fairness, justice, tolerance, and cooperation. Why should these be the common moral decencies? Following the logic of both the humanist and the behavior analyst, they are the common moral decencies because they maximize human happiness and minimize suffering, and have therefore been selected by their consequences. Following Glenn (1986), we can state that the metacontingencies support behavior in keeping with these general categories. Once the rules are internalized, Mal-

ott's (1989) model of self-management tells us why such behavior is emitted even when Nielsen's (1989) conditions of nondetection and nonretribution prevail. This model leads to what we might call "selectionist morality."

The philosophers we have discussed in this paper could be classified as humanists, members of a group that are considered by many as a dangerous force leading to societal breakdown. Malott (1989) has most thoroughly outlined a way in which Nielsen's (1989) question "Why should I behave morally?" could be answered. It is important to note, however, that the conditions that will lead to the state described by Malott need not come into being by any logical necessity. It is certainly logically possible that a rational individual could still be amoral when we consider the contingencies that have shaped his or her behavior thus far in life.

This concept is intolerably fear-inducing to those who insist upon objective morality, and leads to certainty on the part of such individuals that we are "on the eve of destruction." This fear is allayed by Nielsen:

> Unless a man is already ready to run amok, he will not be morally derailed by the recognition that in deliberating about how to act one finally must simply decide what sort of a person one wishes to be. Since most people are not ready to go amok, the truth of my argument will not cause a housing shortage in hell. (1989, p. 193)

The selectionist morality position is that most people are not ready to run amok because their reinforcement history has selected those kinds of behavior that we call moral, and not just because they have a desire to be nice people.

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