

before we say that it did not survive? Is the survival of a culture always "humanly valuable"?

Psychology, no matter what its content domain (operant behavior, species-specific propensities, or anything else) offers no more *justification* for a particular set of moral values than does any other science. On the other hand, psychological theories sometimes attempt to *explain* the development and current status of our moral values. Finally, psychologists' moral values *contribute to the way psychologists "do" psychology*, including their explanations. What questions do they ask? What are their concepts and hypotheses? How do they collect their data? How do they interpret and use the data? Usually stressed are the scientific, technical, and pragmatic considerations which contribute to the answers to these questions, but moral considerations are also involved.⁵

NOTES

1. W. A. Rottschaefer, "Psychological Foundations of Value Theory: B. F. Skinner's Science of Values," *Zygon* 17 (1982): 299.
2. B. F. Skinner, *About Behaviorism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Borzoi Books, 1974).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
5. N. Haan, "Can Research on Morality be 'Scientific'?" *American Psychologist* 37 (1982): 1096-1104; M. Steininger, J. D. Newell, and L. T. Garcia, *Ethical Issues in Psychology* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey, in press).

THE LIMITATIONS OF ETHICAL THEORY

by *William A. Rottschaefer*

Marion Steininger argues that scientific psychology in general and B. F. Skinner's science of behavior in particular cannot provide a way to avoid moral relativism because the descriptions they provide of behaviors are not sufficient for making moral choices nor settling moral conflicts.¹

Before I address these challenges let me mention that I agree with Steininger that moral values "*contribute to the way psychologists 'do' psychology.*"² (The emphasis is Steininger's.) My contention on this score is that rejection of the value-neutrality of science does not necessarily imply a loss of either substantive or methodological objectivity.³ Second, it is clear that radical behaviorists do not give the "usual account" of the role of moral judgments in ethical choice and behavior. I believe this is a deficiency in their approach.⁴ But it is not the case, as Steininger seems to imply, that they do not provide an explanation of the role of moral judgment in ethical behavior, although such an explanation indeed may not be satisfactory to Steininger.

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Steininger's central thesis is that scientific psychology cannot provide us with a way of avoiding moral relativism. I think Steininger demands too much of an ethical theory. The position I explicated is that psychology and biology can provide a nonrelativistic foundation for ethical decisions and moral values by identifying species-specific values, for instance, health, fulfilling work, and justice. These values are not relative to individual, group, society, or culture because they fulfill human individual and social potentialities. But because species-specific values such as these remain general in their content, their specification will vary from person to person and group to group as well as over time.⁵ Such variations do not conflict with the sort of nonrelativistic ethical theory implicit in Skinner's views. They are, indeed, to be expected.

This, however, addresses only part of Steininger's concern for I still seem to commit the so-called naturalistic fallacy. In the limited space for a brief response, I can only reply that the naturalistic hypothesis needs to be considered against its ethical competitors, for instance, Utilitarian and Kantian theories. My contention is that a naturalistic theory is preferable methodologically, epistemologically and explanatorily, although I did not argue that point in the paper under discussion.

But even if we set aside the issues of relativism and a naturalistic foundation of values, there is still the objection that a naturalistic theory does not provide rational grounds to support, for instance, restrictions against various types of mutilation. Steininger is correct but not for the reasons she seems to imply, namely, that an adequate ethical theory should do so. Again, Steininger expects too much of an ethical theory. Though I believe the kinds of values identified in a naturalistic ethics of the sort proposed by Skinner would provide grounds for a *prima facie* prohibition against such practices, it seems clear to me that *no* theory would be *sufficient* to argue against such practices in a concrete situation. Concrete ethical experience and knowledge concerning persons, goals, and circumstances are also necessary in the solution of moral problems. Thus, although one can use evolutionary theory to establish a close connection between individual or gene pool survival and physical well being, one ought not expect, as Steininger seems to, such a connection between survival, health, and concrete ethical choices. Both ethical theory and concrete ethical knowledge are necessary to provide the rational grounds to support specific ethical choices or practices. Yet even this is in a way demanding too much. We do not need to be ethical theorists—fortunately—to act morally. Thus there is a sense in which ethical theory is neither sufficient nor necessary for reaching a moral decision.

Finally, Steininger is quite correct that most important moral choices involve significant value conflict, either between competing values not all attainable in the same situation or between individuals, individual and group, and groups. Skinner's ethical theory neither excludes the possibility of such conflicts nor provides a decision procedure for their resolution. No ethical theory should be expected to do so. Take the issue of survival, the one which seems to Steininger to display decisively the inadequacy of the Skinnerian approach. On the basis of promoting the survival of the individual, the group, or the species one can argue both from biological and psychological theory for *prima facie* obligations to promote health, fulfilling work, and justice. But clearly sometimes individuals must choose between health and work, and societies between conflicting demands for the distribution of goods. Although I have not argued the case, I would expect concrete ethical knowledge, not ethical theory, to be decisive in making such decisions.

But what about survival itself? Why make survival the basic value as any biologically based ethics seems to do? First, Steininger makes the common mistake of reading survival in a reductionistic sense, that is, continued bare existence. But the Skinnerian notion also includes those reinforcing effects which are necessary for the well-being and continued existence of individuals and societies.⁶ Implicit in this sense of survival is the notion of the fulfillment of species-specific capacities. Thus within an evolutionary perspective it is a false dichotomy to oppose survival to other basic values. Second, evolutionary theory, especially its extension in sociobiology, provides a basis for understanding the mutual and reinforcing value of individual and society. Such a theoretical understanding is not sufficient to make concrete ethical decisions about survival, but neither, I maintain, is any other theoretical understanding. The evolutionarily based naturalistic view should be compared with its theoretical competitors, not judged in terms of a job no theory can fulfill.

Although Steininger has raised a plethora of important questions, I believe the requirements she imposes for an adequate ethical theory are too high. As regards those requirements that an adequate ethical theory ought to meet, I contend that a naturalistic ethics based in scientific psychology and biology, like the Skinnerian one that I explicated in the paper under discussion, is the best bet among current competitors in the field; however, it would require a further major paper to argue for this claim.

NOTES

1. Marion Steininger, "Critical Questions for the Psychological Foundations of Value Theory," in this issue, p. 183.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
3. William A. Rottschaefer, "Psychological Foundations of Value Theory: B. F. Skinner's Science of Values," *Zygon* 17 (September 1982): 293-94.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 296 and 300, n. 16; pp. 298 and 301, n. 29.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 299 and 301, n. 31.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 297.