

Commentaries

Editorial Note. Since its inception in 1966, *Zygon* has published occasional short commentaries on main articles. I would like to emphasize the importance of such commentaries for furthering dialogue between members of the *Zygon* community.

A primary purpose of the journal is to publish original, scholarly thinking on the possible interrelationships between science and religion, in order to stimulate fresh thinking and reaction in its readers. An example of fruitful reaction is provided in Marion Steinger's commentary on William Rottschaefer's September 1982 article "Psychological Foundations of Value Theory: B. F. Skinner's Science of Values." Rottschaefer has graciously responded to Steinger's critique, and both pieces together provide a worthwhile example of the kind of dialogue I hope will occur in future *Zygon* issues.

Therefore, without making any commitment to publish everything received, I invite readers of *Zygon* to respond to articles with short (500 to 1,000 words), thoughtful statements of appreciation and criticism. To commentaries judged worthy of publication authors will be invited to respond.

The symbol on the *Zygon* cover, our own modification of the ancient Chinese symbol of the dynamic interaction between Yang and Yin, attempts to capture the idea that we are involved not just in the publication of individual articles but in promoting an ongoing dialogue. I invite you to join Steinger, Rottschaefer, and other commentators in participating in this enterprise.

K. E. P.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF VALUE THEORY

by Marion Steinger

In the September 1982 issue of *Zygon*, William A. Rottschaefer explores the thesis that "our best scientific theories about persons and their behavior provide the best indicators we have of what is humanly valuable and why it is so."¹ Like Rottschaefer, I am sometimes rendered uncomfortable by moral relativism, but I cannot agree that Skinner's psychology provides a way out of this

Marion Steinger is associate professor of psychology, Rutgers University, Camden, New Jersey 08102.

[*Zygon*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June 1983).]

© 1983 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0044-5614

difficulty because it deals with operant conditioning and/or species-specific reinforcers.

Most fundamental is the point that descriptions of behavior as well as statements about relationships between behavior and environment and/or behavior and its consequences are not sufficient bases for making morally relevant choices. We know that it is species specific for humans to have two feet, and we also know what sorts of conditions foster what sorts of foot development. Unfortunately, this does *not* help us to decide whether the binding of girls' feet is good or bad, "humanly valuable" or not; nor whether the mutilation of female sex organs is good or bad; nor even whether "survival" itself is good or bad. Individuals sometimes choose not to survive; furthermore, one can commit oneself to the survival of humankind, be indifferent to it, or even, perhaps, argue against it. No amount of description of behavior or knowledge about its genetic and environmental causes forces us on rational grounds to support mutilation or nonmutilation, human survival or extinction.

While Skinner is committed to the several values mentioned by Rottschaefer, it is unlikely that he thinks that knowledge about eating behavior, for example, commits one to a balanced diet, since the above statement implies a *mental* cause (knowledge) for behavior. We can, on Skinner's view, change behavior by changing the environment, but the details of this behavior-environment relationship do not answer the questions, "Yes, but what behavior is good? What changes shall we make?"

Skinner's values are revealed in several places in *About Behaviorism*.² For example, he writes, "What is good for the species is what makes for its survival. What is good for the individual is what promotes his well-being. What is good for a culture is what permits it to solve its problems. There are, as we have seen, other kinds of values, but they eventually take second place to survival."³ A little later, he asks, "Will a culture evolve in which no individual will be able to accumulate vast power and use it for his own aggrandizement in ways which are harmful to others?"⁴ While I can easily share Skinner's negative evaluation of achieving gains for oneself at the expense of others (this appears to be what in common parlance is called a "gut" or "apple-pie" issue), I also can acknowledge, first, that this evaluation is only loosely related to "survival" (it would be instructive to examine formal arguments about the relationship) and second, that knowing scientific psychology does not necessitate opting on logical grounds for any kind of survival for any particular group or individual.

It also must be pointed out that at least some (perhaps most) moral dilemmas arise when there is *conflict* among the three kinds of survival mentioned by Skinner: individual, cultural, species. For example, if Western culture survives in its present form, few or no members of the human species may survive at all. Or again, given Hitler's ideas and power, one can easily entertain value-laden ideas like, "Too bad he did not commit suicide at the age of 16," or "Too bad he was not murdered at the age of 16," although one might reject these ideas upon reflection.

What we can and do gain from empirical study of people's behaviors, beliefs, and values is a sense of the diversity of human cultures—which may drive us back into the relativism we sometimes seek to escape. Diversity and cultural change raise challenging questions relevant to Skinner's values. For example, in what ways and in what quantity, is ambition "humanly valuable"? Or again, preliterate and literate but prescientific societies survived intact with far less cultural change per decade than our society. How much can a culture change

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.

William A. Rottschaefer is associate professor of philosophy, Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon 97219.

[*Zygon*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June 1983).]

© 1983 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0044-5614