

Chapter 15

Ethics and Morality

The field of ethics is concerned with the study of moral conduct. Our English word “ethics” is derived from the Greek “ethikos,” meaning “custom,” and indeed much of our cultural system of ethics and morality is derived from customs and traditions that began in ancient Greece. Thus, the study of ethics and morality is concerned with the study of how humans ought to live and with what counts as acceptable conduct. Such conduct is concerned with minimizing if not eliminating evil or harm to others. When we speak of *ethics*, we are speaking of the principles by which we evaluate that conduct. When we speak of *morality*, we are speaking of the conduct itself.

As do other chapters in this book, this chapter reviews and analyses its chosen topics from a behavioral point of view. As we will see, a behavioral point of view clarifies many important points in traditional discussions, and leads to a new and refined understanding of ethics and morality.

What is Good Conduct?

What is good conduct? What does it mean to behave in an ethically and morally acceptable way? Behavior analysts address matters of ethics and morality by emphasizing that the behavior in question is operant behavior. Hence, we speak of behavior as moral when it is reinforced by particular consequences. As the definition in the opening paragraph of this chapter suggests, the consequences are minimizing if not eliminating evil or harm to others. Consideration of these consequences helps us to decide whether we want to call the behavior moral or immoral.

Let us consider some examples. Admittedly, the examples may stretch our imagination, but perhaps they will serve to illustrate the important relations. Suppose we see that an individual is having difficulty swimming. We throw a life preserver in the water, and the individual is then able to make it safely to shore. Why did we throw the life preserver in the water? The reinforcer for our behavior is presumably related to our preventing harm to the individual who was having difficulty swimming. As a result, we typically call our behavior moral.

Now suppose that another individual is also having difficulty swimming, but we don't see this individual. We throw a life preserver in the water, and the individual is again able to make it safely to shore. Why did we throw the life preserver in the water this time? We didn't see the individual, so the reinforcer for our behavior was presumably not related to our preventing harm to the individual. The reinforcer may have been something else, such as finding out whether the life preserver would float. In any event, we typically do not call our behavior moral.

Let us modify and extend the example above. Suppose that an individual who was previously having difficulty swimming already has a life preserver. Now suppose that some miscreant takes the life preserver away. Why did the miscreant take the life preserver away? The reinforcer for the miscreant's behavior was presumably related to causing harm to the individual. As a result, we typically call the miscreant's behavior immoral.

Now suppose that we don't see that an individual is having difficulty swimming, and we take a life preserver away that the individual might use to make it safely to shore. Why did we take the life preserver away? We didn't see that the individual was having difficulty swimming, so the reinforcer for our behavior was presumably not related to our causing harm to the individual. As a result, we do not necessarily call our behavior immoral. The qualifier "necessarily" is added here to recognize that an additional factor is whether it is likely the individual would have some difficulty making it to shore without the life preserver, and we were just negligent in not recognizing the potential for the individual to be in peril.

Of course, what we want to do as a culture is to teach people to behave in morally acceptable ways. The integrity of our society turns on the extent to which we minimize if not eliminate the harm we can do to others, either actually or potentially, through our actions. Many of the consequences identified above are socially mediated, in the sense that as we grow up, we learn from others through their recognition and approval how to behave in morally and ethically acceptable ways. At the pinnacle are individuals who regard the opportunity to engage in moral behavior as their highest calling in life, which it surely is.

The traditional view of morality found in Western culture views matters quite a bit differently. According to this traditional view, humans are free, rational beings. They have reasons for their actions. They choose. They judge. Ideally, they accept responsibility, though in some troublesome cases they evade it. Their actions merit praise or deserve blame. They are autonomous agents. Indeed, most of our legal and religious institutions are based on this view. According to the traditional view, then, an individual's behavior is explained by citing some mental process or entity as the cause of that behavior. Moral behavior comes about as a deliberate choice of behaving individuals, who rationally choose to conform to some accepted code of conduct within the social group of which they are members, such as a religious code of conduct.

For the traditional view, an analysis of the circumstances in which an individual lives is not thought to shed much if any light on why the individual acts in a given way. The traditional view is of concern to behavior analysts because it leads us away from an effective understanding of the environmental circumstances that cause individuals to behave in the ways they do. Behavior analysts might well agree that individuals can act in ways that are regarded as rational, but that behavior is attributable to the circumstances individuals have experienced during their lives, rather than some mental process. What is ultimately at issue is how to teach individuals to behave in moral ways. With its emphasis on autonomous events and entities in another domain, such as the autonomous mental processes of an agent who makes rational choices, the traditional view falls short of understanding how a society can actually create and maintain behavior called moral.

Social Impact as Another Consideration

Let us continue our evaluation of morality by considering the importance of the social impact of the behavior. As the term is used here, “social impact” has a broad meaning. In some cases, it relates to the social effect of the behavior for the immediate social group of which the behaving individual is a member.

In other cases, it relates to the social effect of the behavior for the broader culture of which the behaving individual is a member.

In still other cases, it relates to the social effect of the behavior if everyone in the social group behaved in the way in question, not just the one behaving individual. Thus, some form of behavior might not be evaluated as immoral if it occurred in a setting where it would not have a social consequence. For example, yelling “Fire!” would presumably not be evaluated as immoral if the individual who yelled it was marooned alone on a desert island. However, it might well be evaluated as immoral if the individual was in a crowded movie theater and yelled it as a prank, in the absence of an actual fire, just to see people trample each other in their haste to escape.

Many discussions of ethics and morality seek to establish fixed, absolute standards against which to evaluate behavior. These discussions contrast with discussions about whether ethics and morality are only “situational,” and are best limited or relative to particular circumstances. For behavior analysts, some matters of ethics and morality are clearly related to particular customs and conventions. The field of cultural anthropology explicitly studies how different practices have emerged and been strengthened in various cultures, for example, concerning dietary restrictions. These practices may be a function of geographic locale. For example, a culture might impose restrictions against eating a certain food. Perhaps growing that food required an expensive commitment of resources such as water or land that could be better used for some other purpose. Crops or livestock that require vast amounts of water in arid climates are noteworthy examples, as are other restrictions to prevent overuse of available resources. The writings of the cultural anthropologist Marvin Harris (e.g., 1977) provide many other examples.

However, behavior analysts also understand that many other matters of ethics and morality transcend the customs and conventions of particular cultural groups. Do these matters mean that eternal, fixed standards do exist after all? Perhaps a more reasonable way to conceptualize the problem is to say that over the evolutionary history of humans as a species, humans who respond in particular ways to particular circumstances of this lives have benefitted, whereas humans who respond in other ways have not. For example, when their government is harshly coercive, oppressive, and exploitive, most humans tend to rebel sooner or later against the government. The outcome is that even though in the short term humans might suffer a fearful cost of protest, in the long term humans are better off for their protests, for example, because of less aversive control and more stability in the culture. Our conclusion here is that humans have evolved in such a way that enlightened, progressive, and participatory social and political practices ultimately contribute to social stability and group welfare. In this sense they come to be regarded as moral. In contrast, the harsh and punitive social practices of tyrants and despots eventually provoke rebellion. Consequently, the harsh and punitive social practices come to be regarded as immoral.

The “Good”

Sometimes the consequences of behavior make that behavior more likely. These consequences, typically called reinforcers, are often regarded as “good,” at least for the individual concerned. To label

something as good generally requires a broader context than just the one behaving individual, however. For example, consider a bank robber. Robbing a bank is operant behavior. What reinforces the robber's behavior is presumably the consequence of getting money. Indeed, when one bank robber was asked why he robbed banks, he is alleged to have answered "Because that's where the money is." In the narrowest sense, bank robbers might regard their behavior as good. That it is clearly not good may be seen when the broader context is taken into account, as it must be: Robbing a bank is clearly not reinforcing for the welfare and fabric of the larger social group or culture. Bank robbers are taking something that does not belong to them. Of course, robbing a bank is not actually good for the robber either, as the robber is typically caught and sent to prison.

The point is that an individual may behave in a way that might be said to be good for that individual, but bad for the social group. Something that is good for an individual is often a matter of whether it is helpful or adaptive in the individual's life. If someone says that it is good to eat three sound, nutritious meals a day, with no high calorie snacks in between, then presumably the person will lead a longer, healthier life by following such practices. If someone says that it is good to brush one's teeth regularly, then presumably the person will have fewer dental problems. If someone says that it is good to keep one's home free from pests, then presumably the person will have fewer instances of disease and spoiled food. Those outcomes will presumably be reinforcing.

However, what if individuals use large amounts of an insecticide such as DDT to keep their homes free from pests and disease? In fact, what if everyone used large amounts of DDT? DDT has been shown to damage the environment. What is good for the individual may not necessarily be good or reinforcing for the larger social group.

Similarly, what about individuals who work very hard at developing and manufacturing a product? These individuals may well provide a comfortable home and lifestyle for their families, provide jobs with comfortable incomes for others, and be regarded as a credit to their communities. Their hard work might well be described as good. This outcome is reinforcing for the individuals. However, what if a by-product of their manufacturing work is a large volume of industrial waste? What if their lifestyle involves conspicuous consumption, and generates large amounts of trash and garbage? What if everyone did the same? Is their hard work then good? Many would say not, meaning it is not necessarily reinforcing or good for the larger social group.

Often a practice is regarded as immoral and bad if it is coercive, where by coercive we mean it threatens those targeted by the practice with punishment if they do not conform. To be sure, in a limited sense, coercion can be effective as a form of motivation. However, coercion can ultimately lead to dysfunction—those so coerced will seek to escape from the coercion. Thus, the social effects of coercion are ultimately counterproductive, even though coercion may appear to be effective.

A further point is we should not suppose that just because a practice is not coercive, it will automatically yield moral and good social outcomes. For example, state-sponsored lotteries are not coercive in the present sense—individuals are not threatened with punishment if they do not buy a lottery ticket. However, data suggest state-sponsored lotteries entice individuals who can least afford to play the lottery to do so. Spending their limited money in this way is not good for these individuals. As we have seen, the social effects need to be taken into account when we evaluate whether something is good.

To summarize, then, behavior analysts typically evaluate whether behavior is moral or good on the one hand, or immoral or bad on the other hand, by analyzing the contingencies that cause the behavior and its social effects. Such matters are not about metaphysical categories, but rather always about behavior and the circumstances related to that behavior. The social effects range from reducing the quality of the lives of others to infringing on the self-interest of others for the purpose

of exploitation and aggrandizement. Ultimately, concerns about whether something is good or bad can be related to survival: If an individual doesn't survive, then questions about whether a given practice or form of behavior is good or bad for that individual are irrelevant. Similarly, if a society doesn't survive, then questions about whether a given practice or form of behavior is good or bad for that society are irrelevant. A society increases its chances for survival if it teaches its members to take steps to promote its survival. Thus, something is good in the broader social context when it promotes survival in the broader social context. Again, such practices as tyranny and dictatorships cannot be considered good. Tyrants and dictators may seek to justify their practices and behavior by claiming they are promoting survival, but ultimately they are promoting only instability.

The Temporal Context

Many discussions of morals and ethics reflect a concern with the temporal context of behavior. For example, a given form of behavior may have some short-term effects, some intermediate effects, and some long-term effects. In addition, some of those effects may be positive, which is to say reinforcing, and some may be negative, which is to say punishing. Indeed, some instances of behavior may have one kind of short-term effect and the opposite kind of long-term effect. Thus, it is important for us to recognize that outcomes may be assessed on multiple levels.

For example, consider the use of DDT, as mentioned above. Using DDT has the short-term beneficial effect of reducing insects and disease, but the long-term harmful effect of damaging the environment.

Similarly, eating nutritious food is presumably a healthy and reinforcing thing to do in the short term, but eating any food to excess is presumably not reinforcing in the long term, and may even be punishing, as in weight gain and other detrimental effects on health. Moreover, eating a particular kind of food, such as red meat, might be reinforcing in the short term, but red meat sometimes has a high amount of fat and other ingredients that for many persons are harmful in the long term. In fact, even the resources devoted to providing red meat might be used to supply more people with an alternative healthy food source, thereby benefitting the social group in the long term.

The Moral-Ethical Matrix

Overall, behavior analysts find it useful to conceive of matters relating to ethics and morals in terms of a matrix. This matrix establishes a frame of reference for the behavior in question, and for evaluating its effects. Along one dimension of the matrix are levels of the social unit. Three such levels are proposed here, for illustration: the individual, the social group, and the culture. Along the other dimension are levels of time. Again, three such levels are proposed here, for illustration: short term, intermediate term and long term. Typically, an action will impact one or more cells. Matters of ethics and morals relate to comparisons of the impact across various cells in the matrix.

	<u>Individual</u>	<u>Social group</u>	<u>Culture</u>
Short term			
Intermediate term			
Long term			

Particularly significant are clashes between the cells of the matrix. Suppose a given instance of behavior has a short-term reinforcing effect for the individual. However, what if that instance of behavior has disastrous long-term effects for the social group or culture, even if no one else engaged in the behavior in question? What if that instance of behavior has disastrous long-term effects for the social group or culture, but only if everyone engaged in the behavior in question? How are we to regard these problems?

The famous "Tragedy of the Commons" illustrates how a given action might be reinforcing for a small number of individuals over the short term but problematic for the larger social group over the long term (Hardin, 1968; see also Platt, 1973, for related examples). Suppose a social group consisting of 12 families collectively owns a pasture. Each family owns one animal that grazes on the pasture. The common pasture can comfortably tolerate the 12 animals. The resources will not be overused, the grass will grow back, and so on. The animals can graze there indefinitely. Now suppose that one family puts two animals in the pasture. Its profits double. Those consequences are reinforcing for that family, at least in the short term. If another family added a second animal, similar benefits would accrue to the second family.

However, what are the effects if each of the 12 families puts two animals on the land? In the long term, a tipping point would be reached in which no family could graze any animal on the land because all the grass would be eaten and would not have a chance to grow back. The long-term effects for the social group would be disastrous.

The resolution of such problems is complex. For example, the social group might pass laws formally prohibiting such actions and establish some judiciary authority to punish violations of the laws by imposing a fine. The laws may be regarded as formally codified guidelines or discriminative stimuli. The function of the laws is to regulate behavior of individuals and the group in a way that prevents exploitation and promotes stability.

Moral and Ethical Injunctions

Given this approach, what is the force of such words as "ought," "should," and "obligation"? For behavior analysts, such words refer to the contingencies that govern the behavior in question. Suppose we say that individuals *ought* to or *should* behave in some particular way. What we mean is that if a given outcome is important to these individuals, which is to say reinforcing for them, then behaving in the way the contingencies prescribe will result in that outcome.

Obligation may be similarly analyzed. Suppose we say that individuals are obligated to behave in some particular way. What we mean is that the failure to act in the way the contingencies prescribe will result in a punishing outcome. For example, suppose we say that individuals have an obligation to pay their debts. What we mean is that individuals risk some punishing outcome, like not having debts paid back to them, if they don't pay their own debts.

Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, we have reviewed matters of ethics and morals from a behavioral point of view. We are concerned with why someone behaves in a given way, and also with the social effects of the behavior. The social effects of the behavior concern the effect on the individual, the social group, and the culture. The effects may be experienced in the short term, the intermediate term, or the long term. Moral or ethical dilemmas come about when there is conflict among two or more cells of a matrix defining the possible cases.

The unconventional nature of this approach may be seen in its contrast with the prevailing orientation of our culture. Traditionally, our culture holds that individuals are agents who have free will or choice. The traditional position is readily evidenced in our religious and legal institutions. Moral or ethical behavior is thought to come about only because of the exercise of this free choice. If the behavior is compelled, then the behavior, no matter how noble the outcome, is not ordinarily regarded as moral or ethical. Although the traditional approach does have the virtue of taking into account some circumstances responsible for the behavior, it still regards the individual as an autonomous initiator of action, rather than as behaving in a context of relevant factors. Ultimately the position does not allow us to genuinely understand the behavior judged as moral and ethical.

References

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Key Terms and Concepts

ethics
 morality
 ought
 should
 obligation

Study Questions

1. How do ethics differ from morality?
2. What is the behavioral approach to evaluating the “good”?
3. Briefly describe an approach to the analysis of ethics and morals that involves a matrix in which one dimension pertains to levels of the social unit and the other to levels of time.
4. Briefly describe how the “Tragedy of the Commons” illustrates the analysis of ethical problems in terms of a matrix with levels of the social unit on one dimension and levels of time on the other dimension.
5. Briefly describe an independent example of how reinforcing and punishing consequences might conflict in a moral-ethical matrix that involves levels of the social unit on one dimension and levels of time on the other dimension.
6. Briefly describe the behavioral approach to analyzing uses of the terms ought, should, and obligation.