

SOCIAL VALIDITY AND NATURALISTIC ETHICS: WOLF AND QUINE

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ABSTRACT: The use of social validity to better determine the values of persons affected by behavioral interventions has brought the issue of subjective measurement into the objective science of behavior analysis. But on what basis can agreement of relevant members of society affected by behavioral interventions also reflect the ethics of society? Quine's normative ethical relativism is presented as a possible answer to this question.

When Wolf (1978) coined the term "social validity" to describe the importance of better ascertaining the values of persons affected by behavioral interventions, he brought the issue of the subjective measurements of values into a field that prides itself on objectivity (Wolf, 1978). By analyzing the social validation of goals (and, therefore, the ethics they presuppose), Wolf also implicitly made a case for advancing ethics in behavior analysis. But on what basis, beyond agreement of relevant members of society, can it also be determined that the social validation of goals supports values and the ethics they presuppose? Willard Van Orman Quine's normative ethical relativism provides an explanation of ethics, derived from the similarities of the basic problems of society and the uniformity of morality. The purpose of this paper will be to demonstrate-through recounting Quine's scientific analysis of ethics-how a consensual agreement by persons affected by behavioral interventions (i.e., social validity) can reflect a societal ethics.

Social Validity

Baer, Wolf, and Risley (1968) couched applied behavior analysis in an ethical context by defining applied behavior analysis as the application of behavior principles to problems of social importance. The application of behavioral principles was sufficiently straightforward, but what constituted a problem of social importance? Wolf (1978) too was concerned that he was not sure what social importance was or how best to measure it. Indeed, Wolf noted that the field of applied behavior analysis moved forward during its first 10 years (1968-1978) with little objection to accounting for the issues of social importance. Moreover, Wolf was confronted with the question of how best to incorporate subjective criteria into a field that considered itself a natural science. Wolf identified three ways in which

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society would need to validate behavioral interventions. First, are the specific behavioral goals really what society wants? Second, are the procedures socially appropriate, that is, do the participants, caregivers, and other consumers consider the treatment procedures acceptable? Third, are consumers satisfied with the results, including any unpredicted ones?

Einstein, a scientist not unconcerned with ethics, concluded that knowledge of what is does not allow direct access to knowledge of what should be (as cited in Vogeltanz & Plaud, 1992). Science can help determine the means that will be most effective in seeking certain ends, but cannot determine the most appropriate ends to seek in the first place. How can behavior-analytic interventions really be regarded as ethical simply on the basis that society has validated its goals? For example, would the custom among older Alaskan Natives of leaving themselves on ice during particularly brutal winters be a socially valid intervention? Would it not be better to believe Einstein's assertion that science can determine the means that will lead to the most effective ends, but that science cannot determine the appropriate ends to seek in the first place, and leave well enough alone? In making the case for adding subjective measures to objective quality-of-life indicators such as values, Levi and Anderson (1975) argued that the alternative has historically been some sort of big brother, and cited examples of such "expert" and "elitist" opinions being at variance with what was desired by members of society. But on what basis can ethics be studied in the same empirical fashion as science? Simply having concerned members of society agree that an intervention is valid suggests a consensus. For an explanation of how ethics and values can be studied in the same empirical fashion as science, I turn to a brief discussion of Skinner's naturalistic ethics, and then the normative ethical relativism of Quine.

Quine's Normative Ethical Relativism

Skinner's (1953, 1971, 1974) naturalistic ethics begins with the observation that the things people call "good" are positive reinforcers, defined as stimuli that strengthen the behavior they follow. There are two types of "good": those that are reinforcing for the individual's behavior, and those that reinforce societal norms. An organism's response is usually in part the result of a history of reinforcement. Zuriff (1987) adds that the organism is always doing whatever behavior has the greatest response strength. Hence, Skinnerian ethics holds that individuals already and necessarily do the good, that is, that which maximizes reinforcement. A social environment may induce its members to give help even though these members gain nothing from the advantage of the group (Skinner, 1975). Thus, society provides overriding reasons for self sacrifice with practices which have been selected simply because they have contributed to its survival.

Quine also offers a view of values and the ethics as natural phenomena that "are to be studied in the same empirical fashion that animates natural science" (Quine, 1969, p. 26). Quine, not unlike Skinner (1953, 1971, 1974, 1975), provides views on how values become reinforcing, both to the individual and to the values of the

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individual as a member of a societal group. Quine also offers an explanation of how the phenomena of ethics can be explicated, and how the idea of using a measurement to determine the values of persons affected by behavioral interventions can be supported.

Quine (1981) begins by positing two largely overlapping classes of moral values. First, "altruistic" values are ones attached to satisfactions of other persons, or to means to such satisfactions, without regard to ulterior satisfactions accruing to oneself. Second, "ceremonial" values are those one attaches to practices of one's society or social group, again without regard to ulterior satisfaction accruing to oneself. The two overlap in that, "Altruistic values are in part institutionalized and so may take on an added ceremonial appeal. Conversely, there is altruistic value in so behaving as not to offend against a neighbor's ceremonial values" (Quine, 1981, p. 60). Quine also asserts that altruistic values and ceremonial values have shared origins, such as learning from precept and training. Because moral values matter to society, much effort is expended to ensure that each new generation acquires the moral values of their elders (Gibson, 1988). Similarly, Skinner (1975) asserts that we learn moral behaviors because of the consequences that follow. In effect, each generation has been provided with a history of reinforcement and punishment that assures these values become "ends in themselves." Each generation, for example, steps in to guarantee adequate care of the very young, the aged, the infirm, the retarded, and the psychotic.

At one level, moral issues can be resolved to the extent that they can be reduced to other moral values that command agreement (Quine, 1981). But what of ultimate ends, unreduced and so unjustified? Quine argues that ultimate ends, once identified and their basic components reduced to fundamentals, may result in wide acceptance because of the similarities of the basic problems of society. When moral conflicts are about derivative moral values, the conflict may sometimes be resolved by causal reduction. For example, if one individual disputes another's position on some point of morals, the other individual tries to justify his or her position, that is, by reduction to some ultimate end which they both value. Quine argues that this way of resolving moral issues is successful to the extent that we can reduce moral values causally to other moral values that command agreement. For example, Skinner (1975) offers such a dispute with the report of the Ervin Committee, *Individual Rights and the Federal Role in Behavior Modification*. According to Senator Ervin, "The most serious threat posed by the technology of behavior modification is the power this technology gives one man to impose his views and values on another. . . If our society is to remain free, one man must not be empowered to change another's personality" (cited by Skinner, 1975, p. 635). Skinner argues that individuals have always had the power to impose their views on others; the current behavioral processes were not recently invented. Money, for instance, is a powerful and convenient reinforcer, and there are clearly misuses of money. Why does the Ervin committee not consider constitutional safeguards against the power that a person can amass by accumulating money? Like any other means of control in a free society (including, perhaps, the amassment of money), behavior analysis should be

supervised and restrained. Social validity, of course, was developed for this very purpose.

Although social validity may reflect the values and ethics of a society, it may not be able to do so when there is not wide acceptance concerning ultimate ends. When the conflict is about ultimate moral values (e.g., abortion), then the method of causal reduction is unavailable. A similar problem arises with regard to conflict that arises between nations. Quine argues that "conflict between societies is outside of society and is thus morally neutral" (Quine, 1984, pp. 74-75). Therefore, it might be concluded that the aforementioned example of a beloved member sacrificing him or herself to better assure the survival of the species qualifies as ethical in that society even if other societies find the practice objectionable.

Finally, Quine (1984) asserts that the difficulty of resolving moral conflicts is exacerbated because ethics lacks the precision, for example, of the natural sciences. The lack of empirical checkpoints is especially disturbing when the ultimate good is at stake (Quine, 1984). Indeed, it was this concern with the untidiness that led to Wolfs (1978) attempt to define the fuzzy subjective criterion of social importance. Although social validity may not completely answer the ethical dimensions of a behavioral intervention, it does help assure that the interventions are closer in harmony with what society wants and values rather than reflecting the opinions of experts (Levi & Anderson, 1975). Social validity, as Skinner might have argued, also offers supervision and restraint of these behavioral interventions that is markedly lacking in other areas of social life, such as the unchecked amassment of money and its misuses.

Conclusion

In sum, Quine's view of ethics demonstrates how ethics can be understood as emerging out of a society as a result of learning from precept and training (e.g., the importance of transmitting ethical standards from one generation to the next). Hence, the reason a behavior is regarded as "good" can be explicated by examining the contingencies of societal expectations and training. Consequently, agreement on ethical questions can sometimes be resolved in a societal context. Quine's view of normative ethical relativism, derived from the similarities in the basic problems of societies, supports the ways in which social validity can reflect an ethics of the larger society. Wolfs efforts to measure the social validity of behavioral interventions and their outcomes has brought the issue of ethics into the application of science. In this domain of social validity, scientists may have to live without the comfortable certainty of stubborn fact in the application of science, but society's validation of the goals of science may go a long way in assuring that science does not overstep its bounds and, therefore, not assume to decide the most appropriate ends to seek in the first place.

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