

Personhood & Superstition Part II (of IV)

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[Presented here is the Second of four related works. These works are (a) "The Nature of Personhood," (b) "More Implications of Misconstrued Personhood," (c) "Cultural Investment in Superstition," and (d) "Behavioral Engineering to Reduce Superstition." These four pieces are all excerpts from parts of "Person, Life, and Culture," a later chapter of the author's book, *General Behaviorology: The Natural Science of Human Behavior* (Fraley, in press). The relevance of these pieces to managing improvements in ongoing cultural concerns increases their interest to readers of this journal. The four pieces appear, one at a time, in consecutive issues beginning with the Spring 2006 issue (Volume 9, Number 1).—Ed.]

More Implications of Misconstrued Personhood

The continued interpretation of evidence on the basis of superstitious assumptions tends to lead ultimately to mistakes in dealing with practical matters and to the disappointing outcomes of those mistakes. Attempts to interpret practical situations from the perspective of superstitious assumptions can leave logic stretched to the breaking point. Concepts that are based on fundamentally superstitious assumptions are ultimately unreliable, and that remains true no matter how elaborate or gussied with scholarly affectations their supportive casuistry may become.

In the arena of practical affairs, the failure of superstition-based endeavors is almost inevitable. Only by improbable accident would that approach prove optimally effective. Those failures often transcend the adverse personal implications for the individuals who are directly involved insofar as they also portend more broadly encompassing difficulties at the cultural level.¹ Fur-

¹ An example pertains to the abortion of a human fetus in the case of an unwanted pregnancy. The superstitious presumption that the fetus is possessed and behaviorally operated by a sacrosanct soul may preclude actions to abort that pregnancy. The personal outcome for the mother may be a future of vastly diminished quality. But not only may her life be ruined, her child may be innately

thermore, the disastrous implications of reliance on superstition can more rapidly become realized under the fast pace of change in modern times. Often those adverse results come as a surprise, because under the distractions of hewing to the superstitiously sanctioned course of action the adverse implications of those practices are often subject to early neglect by those who engage in them. But even when an adverse outcome is predictable the underlying superstitious ideology, however misguided, may prescribe that such adversity be endured as the cost of moral or ethical propriety.

In some cases the underlying natural contingencies prevail regardless of the control exerted by a person's superstitious verbal behavior. The person behaves rationally regardless of a verbal repertoire that would otherwise tend to evoke other kinds of behavior. However, given the typical socio-cultural respondent conditioning to which such a person is likely to have been subjected, on such occasions the person's automatic respondent emotional reactions match the behavior that would have occurred under the exclusive control of the superstitious verbal repertoire in the absence of the natural controls. The person behaves rationally but feels guilty, ashamed, or sinful about having done so. Although that effect is often called *self-punishment*, it is the behaviorally engineered product of those who arranged the respondent conditioning that made such an emotional effect inevitable on such occasions.

The Essence and Worth of Persons

Consider the totality of all of the behavioral manifestations of which the mediating body is capable when environmentally stimulated. One's unique personal identity is almost entirely established by the normally extensive operant aspect of that repertoire. The various aspects of a total operant person manifest selectively according to the prevailing contingencies under which the individual is currently behaving. When the capacity to behave operantly is entirely and permanently lost, the "person" is dead. The biological body that previously mediated the operant behavior that was the person may remain physiologically alive in other ways, but, in the permanent absence of the capacity for further person-defining behavior, the body is normally subject to discard even though some of its physiological maintenance functions and the capacity for various respondent behaviors may yet persist.

defective, and whether physiologically defective or not, may be subject to inadequate or improper conditioning due to insufficient resources. If such cases arise often, the culture can become overburdened with the implications of too many such physiologically and/or behaviorally defective people. Symptoms at the cultural level include prisons filling, welfare costs soaring, and squalor expanding.

That discard may take the form of disposing of what is left of the body after some disassembly to salvage reusable parts. That such an operation may result in the biological death of the personless body may not be regarded as a deterrent. The disposal of biological remnants may be deemed unimportant and may occur as nothing more than commitment to a garbage container, or the occasion may be construed to be ceremonial and to feature an elaborate ritual surrounding some kind of a funeral, including burial, cremation, or other special form of relinquishment.

An occasional alternative is to commit the biologically vital but person-incapable body to medically supervised storage and maintenance under what is described as a continuing life-support arrangement. In that state, much of the internal integrity of the body is maintained, but such a generally alive body is progressively less likely ever to experience a restoration of its operant capabilities. Such a comatose state can, in some cases, be maintained for decades. Although recovery of the former capacity to exhibit the dormant operant repertoire seldom happens, its rarity brings to such preservative projects the special persistence that is endowed by the stretch of variable ratio schedules of reinforcement. In reality, such rare recoveries of operant behavioral capacity tend to be only partial—in most such cases, rather limited. Thus, across cases the cost-to-benefit ratio can range from favorable to unfavorable, and advances in the technology of neural physiological probing continue to improve the reliability of the predicted outcomes.

If a body is biologically dead, it may nevertheless be preserved, perhaps to be displayed as a mummified relic or symbol of the terminated person that it once supported. The potential value of a dead body for involvement in such a costly preservation project, perhaps for venerational purposes, is usually based on the importance of the behaviors that such a body formerly mediated.² However, its worth may eventually become more archeological and pertain to the clues it provides about the circumstances of its antiquity.

² The pairing of a body's nonbehavioral qualities with the behaviors that it mediates tends to result in the respondent conditioning of bodily properties to function as evocative stimuli for social behavior. When death occurs and the behaving stops, the pairing of stimuli that is essential to that conditioning process is terminated. The previously conditioned relations may persist for awhile insofar as people may react for a time to a dead body as if it were the person (speaking to it, for example). However, behavior is the medium of strong reinforcement for such responses, so in the absence of behavior the previously conditioned kinds of responding tend to extinguish. Thus, the features of a dead body tend rather quickly to lose their capacity to evoke such responses.

The fact that the concept of personhood inheres in the operant repertoire of an individual to a far greater extent than in the respondent repertoire has further implications that are worth exploring. We note, to cite an example, that the sociocultural quality of a person is determined more by the skillful and relevant speaking of six languages than by the knee jerks, eye blinks, salivation, and other automatically elicited responses that that individual exhibits. An individual's political behavior is more definitive of that *person* than is the shivering that that individual exhibits when chilled. It remains obvious that it is the particulars of the *operant* repertoire that most establish a person, and we tend to measure the worth of a person by gauging the quality of the outcomes of that individual's operant kind of behavior.

The operant repertoire of the typical human being is sufficiently extensive that nearly everyone exhibits at least some behavior that serves the interests of others and the interests of the group. Thus, from the general perspective of others, every individual has at least some worth as a person. Thus, the concept of individual worth is readily subject to abstraction, and people typically, if often unhelpfully, describe the result in terms of the "sanctity of human life." Such transitions to abstraction, rising into the realm of cultural practice, tend to be bolstered by the strong emotional conditioning that inheres in the wide ranging and intense reinforcement of any behavior that comports with that abstraction.

In particular cases, the practical implications of that abstraction often prove to be so impractical or costly that respect for life fails to manifest. In that case, the arena of respect for the basic proposition may undergo a convenient conceptual shift from the material world with which people must cope to an ethereal realm that they can control merely by metering their own awe in response to the idea of it. For example, if it is too bothersome or costly to insure that a troublesome individual meets the qualitative norms of personhood for the group, the sanctity of that individual may be abandoned to God's respect while the person's fate as a group member is left to judicial resolution under more practical and mundane social contingencies. Thus, condemned criminals may be assured that God will welcome them with mercy and compassion and are then executed.

During assessments of the relative worth of the individuals within a group, respect for a concept of sociocultural equality that relies exclusively on mere biological species membership is largely a luxury of surplus wealth. As the resource base of a culture shrinks, traditional rhetoric of equality may persist (e.g., public assertions that "*all citizens are equal*"). However, practices that comport in practical ways with such a pretended contributory equality tend to fade. Increasingly, the well-being of those who behave more effectively is disproportionately

protected, especially if their effective behavior benefits the group. As cultural resources diminish, the well-being of the more effective people tends to become progressively less compromised in support of an abstract notion of equality among all individuals, especially relative to the well-being of those individuals whose behavioral contributions remain unlikely ever to reach qualitative par.

For example, in resource-deficient cultures governmental decisions to allocate scarce resources are unlikely to favor programs of welfare for individuals whose bodies lack the potential to mediate behavior that would be effective in furthering the well-being of the group. These neglected persons may include those who are too elderly to exhibit much of their formerly effective repertoire, those who are innately defective or traumatized beyond the reach of low-cost repair, or those whose opportunities for the operant conditioning of a culturally valuable repertoire have been expended to little avail. It is no accident that government welfare programs that even modestly comport with the rhetoric of universal human equality tend to characterize only governments that have surplus wealth at their disposal. People who fashionably proclaim that all individuals are equal in the eyes of God may withhold arguments that all should be equal in the eyes of the state if those proclaimers must be taxed to make it so.

As an illustration, consider a somewhat impecunious government that can afford either (a) pavement on the main thoroughfare of the largest city or (b) free government-provided family assistance with the care of severely retarded children who, regardless of that assistance, could never be rendered capable of contributing productively to the physical or economic improvement of the cultural system. With the government able to afford only one of those expenditures, the prevailing sociocultural contingencies favor the paving, ... a kind of project that typically affects many more people and is replete with various potential benefits of kinds that imply the improved well-being of the group as a whole.

The worth of a person to the culture of which that person is a part is based on the effectiveness and efficiency of that part of an individual's behavior that has implications for the well-being of the group. It follows logically that individuals who cannot exhibit much behavior of that kind, or who exhibit counterproductive behavior, are generally regarded as worth less in the arena of practical affairs, and they are treated accordingly. Regardless of empty rhetoric about equality, they are the first to be sacrificed or eliminated when resources are scarce or their behavior becomes threatening (e.g., the unborn, the young, the elderly, the destitute, the physiologically impaired, and the criminal). As available resources shrink, the often strongly conditioned emotional predisposition to nurture such individuals seldom proves sufficient to

overcome indefinitely the expenditure of the costly resources that is typically required to maintain them. Once such low contributors exist, the potential for their salvation inheres in the economic prosperity of their culture.

Individuals who contribute negatively, and who cannot be rendered economically productive, create a kind of problem that can be eliminated either of two ways: Corrective interventions may end or at least mitigate the problem. Alternatively, certain practices may preclude such problems by avoiding the creation of individuals who are prone to cause them. Historically, such efforts of either kind include or have included (a) eliminating defective bodies through abortion prior to their birth or at birth, (b) the acceleration of education and training to insure and hasten the transition of the relatively ineffective young to productive citizenship, (c) practices that prolong the physiological capacity of bodies that are otherwise subject to the behavior-disrupting ravages of old age, (d) practices that hasten or precipitate the death of those who have become unproductive and dependent through illness, trauma, or aging, (e) practices of neglect with respect to those whose behavioral conditioning is slow, difficult, and costly (and, in extreme cases, subjecting them to termination), and (f) quickly executing criminals and other kinds of intolerable social disrupters as an economical alternative to the much greater costs of extended incarceration or to long costly programs of rehabilitative reconditioning.³

³ Examples of each class can be cited: (a) Currently, when imaging techniques reveal that a fetus is extremely microcephalic, it is typically aborted; (b) a current example is provided by the *Headstart* program, which renders preschool children more prepared for regular schooling, and by vocational programs that condition future workers to start exhibiting at an earlier age the job skills that are more characteristic of adult employment; (c) this is a principal goal within the field of geriatric medicine; (d) in cultures that have practiced slavery, the economic burden of caring for slaves who could no longer work was in some cases eased by killing them, the options being either conspicuously (to encourage other slaves to continue working as long as possible) or inconspicuously (to avoid fomenting rebellion); (e) through most of human cultural history educational resources were expended by governments only on individuals who were subject at least to normal conditioning while funds for the "special education" of those who were unlikely ever to contribute significantly to the group productivity were withheld; (f) during military campaigns, deserters and even ordinary prisoners have in some cases been executed immediately, typically because the exigencies of the ongoing campaign left few resources that could be devoted to their imprisonment, mainte-

The quality of an individual's personhood is based on the implications of that individual's behavior in relation to the interests of those who judge that quality. Thus it follows that, from the perspective of any individual or any group, no two people could be deemed to be of equal worth as persons by any specified measure of their behavior. This reality manifests in one way through the practices by which leaders are recognized and selected. A leader is rarely if ever selected randomly from among a qualitatively disparate population. At the same time, unanimous agreement on the worth of any individual as a potential leader is unlikely. Social chaos is avoided in one way through the social device of dictatorship whereby the candidate who is most able to do so seizes political power, and in another way through the social device of democracy whereby a leader is elected by a majority of those who will be led.

Other implications of this natural and inevitable inequality among behaviorally defined people are connoted by the terms *exemplar* and *model*. In informal situations, we are all accustomed to handing the reigns of temporary control to the person whose behavior has proven most effective in similar situations, a reflection of the relative value of that person (i.e., the relative value of that individual's *behavior*). We choose among candidates on the basis of their behaviors, and when it matters in any important way, we do not pretend that all are of equal worth with respect to the role that the person must play.

We typically adhere to fairness through how we establish the relative worth of various candidates to confront a particular challenge. We simply begin the comparative process with the blind assumption that all are of equal worth and then let the behavioral evidence shift the placement of each person on the qualitative scale. Thus, the comparative quality measurement based on exhibited behavior begins without anyone being burdened with an irrelevant disadvantage.

Presented with similar environments, a person's response to such an environment may advance a person's qualitative standing or reduce it, and one's qualitative status at any time is the net effect of those personal increases and decreases. Such tests of effectiveness and efficiency may be contrived (e.g., admission tests administered by a university or qualification tests given to prospective employees by a governmental agency). Alternatively, such tests may occur entirely under natural contingencies. The most effective soldier on the battlefield gets a field promotion; the person who during a flood was saved by behaving rationally and effectively is extolled as an exemplar. Such established differentials in status, if sufficiently extreme or contrasting among people, are often signified by

nance, and rehabilitation, and because their quick dispatch has been deemed a deterrent.

designating those who behaved more successfully as *smart* and those who behaved less effectively as *foolish* or *stupid*, but those attributions usually pertain to the erroneously presumed self-agent.

Such elevations in the worth of an individual often occur without regard to whether neural behavior was functionally involved in the control of the critical behavior. For example, effective behavior that occurs under direct stimulus control will often affect the socially determined worth of an individual to the same extent as behavior that occurs under the partial control of operant neural behavior.

For instance, the bodyguard who instantly leaned intuitively in front of the President and took an assassin's bullet may get the same favorable reaction as one whose similar action was the culmination of a carefully conceived plan. In other cases an individual's social worth as a person may increase as the result of a behavior-related accident as when a window washer's inadvertently dropped water bucket knocks unconscious a terrorist who is preparing to detonate a bomb on the sidewalk below. In cases such as these, it is the practical outcome that matters most to others (who arguably should be more discriminating), not how the critical behavior that produced the desirable outcome was controlled.

Because a person's operant behavior as well as certain aspects of one's respondent behavior is controlled through the functional relations (between environment and behavior) that have been conditioned during that person's lifetime, parenting is largely the business of constructing a new person by arranging an expansive and varied program of behavioral conditioning that extends across the first couple of decades of each new person's life and may continue in a less formal and less intensive manner through much of its remainder. That production of a new person is typically shared with close others who have an especially vested interest in the nature and quality of the behavioral product, such as relatives, friends, and neighbors. In this person-producing process, the interests of the state are reflected in the behavior-conditioning contributions by school teachers. This participatory model is reflected in the popular aphorism "*it takes a village to raise a child*," although in this sense the phrase "...raise a child" means "...condition an extensive, effective, and appropriately common pre-adult repertoire of operant and respondent behavior." In common terms, included are what the new person does on any given kind of occasion and the person's emotional feelings about the situation.

A somewhat isolated subcommunity within a larger culture may be producing people whose behavioral quality differs significantly from the cultural norm due to the atypical child rearing practices of that subcommunity. If the behavioral products of a subcommunity are substan-

dard or merely incompatible with the general behavior of others within that culture, such unfavorable disparity is typically regarded as a cultural flaw. The population at large cannot afford the implications of excessive numbers of insufficiently and disparately conditioned citizens. The community as a whole, acting through its organized cultural agencies of government and education, typically requires a regimen of formal schooling with a common curriculum, which insures the general kind of commonality in behavior to which the phrase *cultural integrity* alludes in the abstract.

In cultures that practice a strict separation of church and state, the involvement of the cultural agency of religion in the production of a new person differs somewhat from the role played by the agency of formal education. Unlike the cultural agency of education, the imposition of which is simply enforced through the agencies of government and law, the involvement of the church in the conditioning of an individual is initially a cooperative venture with the parents and eventually with the sufficiently matured individual.

While various individuals and agencies participate in the conditioning of each new person, the nature of such a progressively crafted self has been widely misunderstood. In the invalid common interpretation, the person-production process involves the education of a self-agent. However, a different and more worthwhile concept of a self has emerged that supports a more valid concept of the person-production process. In Chapter 18 of *Science and Human Behavior* (1953), B.F. Skinner treated the self as a conceptual device for representing a unified system of responses. That is, in response to different situations, an individual discriminatively comes to exhibit respective patterns of relevant and effective behavior. Each such set of coherent behaviors (or pattern of behaving) represents a different behaviorally defined self.

Thus, a given person typically consists of many such selves. The unity of any given self is determined by the integrity of the particular kind of environmental setting or situation that evokes the pattern of behavior that defines that self. That particular setting is said to represent the context in which that self was conditioned and in which it subsequently manifests (i.e., the kind of situation in which its behavioral elements tend to be evoked and in which they tend to be effective, where ...*be effective* means ...*be reinforced*).

Thus, the set of related responses that is definitive of a specific *self* inheres in the related set of contingencies that produce a given set of contextually relevant responses. For example, in reference to a given person, we may speak of that individual's "political self," "family self," "recreational self," "business self," "professional self," and "military self." Each such behavioral repertoire is typically construed to reflect one of the various facets of what is com-

monly called that person's *character* or *personality*. People who have known that person only as a professional acquaintance may be taken aback by the very different kind and style of behaving that characterizes that person's activity in a political, familial, or military context.⁴

As those respectively differing unified systems of responses (i.e., the person's various *selves*) become relatively numerous and respectively more disparate, the person (or the person's character) may be said to be getting more complex. To account validly for what is often misdescribed as a complex agential character, we note that the person's general behavior-controlling environment has become varied and complex. Rather than insisting that a mysterious inner person has willfully adjusted to the increasing complexity of that total environment, we say that the general behavior-controlling environment in which that individual has had to operate has imposed diverse contingencies that have resulted in the corresponding complexity in the person's overall behavioral reactions and has done so through numerous and diverse instances of the general operant and respondent conditioning processes. Such conditioning can be contrived by other people, in which case it is called *education* or *training*, or it can occur naturally, in which case it tends to be called *experience*.

Obviously, within a given culture or subculture, the various selves of a given person are not necessarily of equal general worth to the populations of the respective subcultures with which that individual interacts. The individual who is highly valued for the exemplary manner in which that individual conducts a small business or leads a family may prove to be of relatively little worth as a battlefield soldier or as a politician.

⁴ During my undergraduate years at the University of Colorado, I befriended a fellow geology student with whom I seemed to have much in common and with whom I enjoyed conversing. Our early discussions often centered on social and scientific issues. One day one of our conversations turned to the topic of death, and he began to describe enthusiastically and in some detail a variety of ways in which one person could efficiently kill another individual during a brief episode of very personal contact. I was startled at his entirely unrestrained yet quite thorough review of the various approaches to the dispatch of another person (some quite gruesome) with or without weapons during brief but very personal encounters. It was as if he was casually explaining different ways to build a birdhouse. Only then did I learn that he had long been a member of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) at the university and that he was preparing for a military career in the United States Army. During that conversation he had merely been reiterating the curricular content of one of his recent ROTC courses. It was my abrupt introduction to one of his selves that I had not anticipated.

Effective behavior that was conditioned in one kind of situation is often evoked by similar elements in another kind of situation, but that behavior may not prove effective in the new situation. The correction of that problem often involves bringing the individual's behavior more tightly under stimulus control of features that are exclusively associated with the new situation, so that responses that are apropos of only the old situations will no longer be evoked in the new setting. Behavior that was relevant or appropriate in past situations may thus be kept from occurring in a similar yet importantly different current situation in which it would not fit. Alternatively, a current situation may be modified in peripheral ways until the old behavior that its more intrinsic features evoke begins to be effective. The resulting behavior changes are often described as the "refinements in the person's character traits," but character traits do not exist as causal entities, and the processes described here are not validly interpretable as tinkering with behavior-causing "traits."

The general worth of a person to a group is typically greater when that person's behavior comports effectively with the current situation even though that behavior may be quite inappropriate in a different situation. The critical difference in those situations may pertain to the presence or absence of certain function-altering stimuli, often a simple factor that "makes a great deal of difference," as they say. The individual, in continuing to respond effectively to such changes, perhaps of a subtle nature, is typically described as *adaptable*. Nevertheless, it is the environment that remains in control, not the person.⁵ The situation-specific patterns of behavior that are of special interest in this discussion result from the tightness and exclusiveness of the control that any given environment can exert on that individual's behavior-capable body parts.

The Nonbehavioral Qualities of Personhood

While a person is defined largely by behavioral qualities, a person's nonbehavioral qualities also share to a lim-

⁵ When we talk about the throwing of a rock by saying that the throw was initiated by the thrower to change the location of the rock, we could just as well say that the rock used the thrower to mediate a change in its location. *Neither* kind of explanatory recourse to an implicit spontaneous proactive initiation of activity is valid. Process (behavioral or otherwise) happens to structure when energy impinges on it, and the particulars of that process are jointly determined by (a) the structure from which the energy emanated, (b) the structure on which it impinges, and (c) the properties of the energy transmission between those structures. Items (a), (b), and (c) are the constituents of what we call a *functional relation*, and functional relations are always established naturally without the redundant intervention of a mystical agent.

ited degree in defining a person. Those nonbehavioral qualities of a person may evoke some social behavior by other people, and may also become conditioned reinforcers for some of their social behavior. Examples of such nonbehavioral qualities include the form of a person's body including its appearance and textural feels, ...and usually to a lesser extent, its odors, sounds, and tastes. Its warmth affords another example.

The presentation of one's nonbehavioral qualities is almost always paired with one's behavior.⁶ The conditioning of other peoples' social behavior in reaction to one's personal but nonbehavioral qualities typically implies a close association of those other people with one's behavior. As others are usually quick to explain, it's not just the physical warmth of the person's body, but the behavior of the person by way of which that warmth is shared. It is not only the person's appearance that is important, but the behaviors through which the person's features are exhibited.

An experimental separation of behavioral and nonbehavioral features can be used to reveal the independent contribution of nonbehavioral qualities to the appreciated worth of a person. Suppose, for example, that one has long maintained a strongly reinforcing social relation with another person with whom one is intimately close. It could be a spouse or similarly related partner or companion. Suppose, further, that a very lifelike mannequin is constructed to present the nonbehavioral qualities of that familiar person. The mannequin is not alive in the biological sense, and it does not exhibit behavior, but one finds that it looks, feels, smells, tastes, and sounds like the body of that other person with whom one is very familiar. Assume that it has also been built to maintain the temperature of a live human body. Perhaps it has even been constructed to exhibit some noncontingent movements of kinds that the other person occasionally behaves contingently.

One's reactions to such a mannequin would reveal the limited role that such nonbehavioral qualities play in establishing personhood, and expose the rather glaring deficiency in that process that follows from an absence of behavior. It also becomes obvious that if one had never had contact with the person's behavior and had been limited exclusively to contacts with that mannequin, the mannequin's nonbehavioral qualities, in their isolation from any directly or indirectly associated behavior, would tend not to have attained a conditioned reinforcing capacity that approaches what would have been acquired had those qualities been associated with behavior. Hence the traditional opine by magazine subscribers that, while it can be nice to look at peoples' pictures, a person's picture is no substitute for the real thing (wherein the essence of *real thing* is anchored mostly in behavioral qualities)...✻

⁶ An exception could occur with respect to a person whom one knows only via telephone communications.

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