

## THE TRUE, THE GOOD, AND THE BEAUTIFUL: SELECTION BY CONSEQUENCES AS A UNIFYING APPROACH TO THE “TRANSCENDENTALS” OF PHILOSOPHY

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*Abstract:* Radical behaviorism suggests that three of the most fundamental concepts in philosophy—namely, truth, goodness, and beauty—can all be interpreted as verbal responses selected by their consequences. Behavioral selection thus serves as a wide-ranging interpretive principle for radical behaviorism—one that applies to all philosophical problems. In this article, I aim to explore some implications of this perspective for the treatment of the concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty. I conclude that these implications characterize radical behaviorism as a distinctive and unorthodox proposal in the traditional philosophical landscape.

*Keywords:* radical behaviorism, transcendentals, selection by consequences

The concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty have been guiding philosophical reflection since its very beginning. Gardner (2012) regards them as “three crucial human virtues,” noting that the most influential Greek philosophers—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—made considerable efforts to define them. Moreover, he states that “every known civilization” has been concerned with them, as they deal with fundamental aspects of everyday life. Discussion of these concepts became central to the main branches of philosophical investigation: epistemology (truth), ethics (goodness), and aesthetics (beauty). This division roughly persists to this day.

In Christian theology, truth, goodness, and beauty have been called “transcendentals” (fundamental properties of being) since medieval scholasticism (in Latin: *verum, bonum, pulchrum*). The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that “all creatures bear a certain resemblance to God, most especially man,” and that “the manifold perfections of creatures— their truth, their goodness, their beauty all reflect the infinite perfection of God” (The Holy See, 1993, para. 41). A progressive loss of importance of these transcendentals is occasionally deemed responsible for the “decline of the West” (Cooper, 2021) and for a dehumanizing, controlling tendency in contemporary educational practices (Turley, 2018).

More recently, science has tried to unravel the intricacies of truth, goodness, and beauty. Topics traditionally approached by philosophers are now also investigated with empirical methods. Fields like experimental epistemology (Beebe, 2014), experimental ethics (Lütge et al., 2014), and empirical aesthetics (Nadal & Vartanian, 2022) try to explore philosophical questions from a scientific perspective, mostly using cognitive and neurobiological frameworks. “Neuronal approaches” to the true, the good, and the beautiful are proposed (e.g., Changeux, 2012; Chatterjee & Cardillo, 2021).

As a philosophy in constant dialogue with a science of behavior, radical behaviorism offers an original, naturalistic, and contextual perspective on truth, goodness, and beauty. This perspective was first suggested by B. F. Skinner. It confers a central role to the concepts of reinforcement and punishment, and more broadly to selection by consequences as a causal model which explains human behavior. In this article, I aim to explore some implications of this perspective for the treatment of the concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty.

I don’t mean to propose solutions to all the philosophic and scientific problems that such concepts evoke. They are among the most complex in the intellectual history of humanity, and the literature

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concerning them is wide-ranging. I suppose, however, that what follows may offer some relevant guidelines for those who aim to explore these problems from a radical behaviorist perspective.

### **The Basic Framework: Reinforcement, Punishment, and the “Transcendentals”**

Whenever he mentions the concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty (or related concepts)<sup>2</sup>, Skinner points out that they are verbal responses, which tend to be emitted when a speaker is under control of particular contingencies of reinforcement.

Although noticing Skinner’s occasional leanings towards a correspondence theory of truth, Zuriff (1980) noted that what predominates in his works is a pragmatic theory of truth, according to which verbal behavior is usually called true if it is conducive to behavior that is “effective,” “successful,” “efficient,” “useful,” “expedient,” “workable,” or “productive” (p. 345).<sup>3</sup> All these terms loosely point to reinforcing consequences of behavior, and Skinner (1968) expressly equates effectiveness with reinforcement: “Faced with a situation in which no effective behavior is available (in which we cannot emit a response which is likely to be reinforced), we behave in ways which make effective behavior possible (we improve our chances of reinforcement)” (p. 120). Conversely, verbal behavior that leads to behavior that is “ineffective,” “unsuccessful,” “inefficient,” etc., is usually called “false”—the consequences of such behaviors having a punishing effect.

In regards to ethics, as I summed up elsewhere (Dittrich, 2016), Skinner

spends considerable time pointing to the variables that control the emission of ethical words, and comes to the conclusion that we usually call positive reinforcers “good” and negative reinforcers “bad” - or, said another way, that “good” and “bad” are usually tactics emitted in the presence of, respectively, positive and negative reinforcers. (p. 11)

Thus, one may call many things and events<sup>4</sup> “good”—from ice cream to charity—or “bad”—from cabbage to crime—presumably according to their reinforcing effects. According to Skinner (1971), “to make a value judgment by calling something good or bad is to classify it in terms of its reinforcing effects” (p. 104).

Finally, Skinner repeatedly states that artistic appreciation (and production) is maintained by reinforcing consequences, and that we tend to call a work of art “beautiful” if its appreciation is positively reinforced (Skinner, 1953/2014; 1970/1999; 1972/1999; 1977/1978). In a particularly revealing passage, Skinner (1970/1999) states that

The word “reinforcing,” though technical, is useful as a rough synonym for “interesting,” “attractive,” “pleasing,” and “satisfying,” and all these terms are commonly applied to pictures. For our present purposes it is particularly useful as a synonym for “beautiful.” Pictures are by definition reinforcing in the sense that they are responsible for the fact that artists paint them and people look at them. (p. 345)

Conversely, we tend to call “ugly” art that is punishing to look at or otherwise be in contact with. We also find many things “beautiful” or “ugly” in everyday life even if they are not necessarily connected to artistic behavior, but these responses are also generally called “aesthetical” in the philosophical vocabulary.

To sum up, Skinner states that reinforcing consequences usually increase the probability of emission of verbal responses like TGB and its correlates, while punishing consequences usually increase the probability of emission of verbal responses like FBU and its correlates. From this point of view, then, reinforcement and punishment are central to any discussion of TGB and FBU.

### **Reinforcement, Punishment, and Verbal Hierarchies Regarding TGB and FBU**

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<sup>2</sup> From now on, whenever convenient, I will use the acronyms TGB (for truth/true, good/goodness, and beauty/beautiful) and FBU for (falsehood/false, badness/bad, and ugliness/ugly).

<sup>3</sup> Zuriff (1980) lists all the references in which Skinner uses these words.

<sup>4</sup> The word “events” in the expression “things and events,” which I will frequently use in this paper, must be taken as including verbal and nonverbal events.

A simple division between “reinforcing” and “punishing” things or events (or positive and negative reinforcers) may hide the complexity of such processes. To begin with, the consequences of operant behavior may have varying effects upon the rate of response classes of any given organism and may be considered more, or less, reinforcing or punishing, accordingly. In technical terms, reinforcers and punishers vary in their magnitude. For any given organism, then, every consequence may be taken as falling into a continuum ranging from the most reinforcing to the most punishing. As reinforcer magnitude may vary over time and in different contexts for a given person, so may their tendency to call things and events TGB or FBU. As a result, things and events may be classified as more or less TGB or FBU by this person in different contexts and at different points in time.

As Skinner noted, this may lead this person to emit words other than TGB or FBU, in a hierarchical fashion – for example: “We may classify useful propositions according to the degrees of confidence with which they may be asserted. Sentences about nature range from highly probable ‘facts’ to sheer guesses.” (Skinner, 1955-1956/1999, p. 29). Similarly, things and events may be classified not only as “good” and “bad,” but as “wonderful” or “awful,” and all the words “in between”; not only as “beautiful” and “ugly,” but as “gorgeous” or “hideous,” and all the words “in between”—always according to the practices of specific verbal communities and the discriminative precision they require in its hierarchical classifications.

### **Selection by Consequences and the Control of Verbal Responses Regarding TGB And FBU**

Sensibility to reinforcing and punishing stimuli is a joint product of the interaction of three levels of behavioral selection—phylogenetic, ontogenetic, and cultural (Skinner, 1969, 1971, 1981). Thus, our tendency to call things and events TGB or FBU is also a joint product of this interaction. Any innate susceptibilities to be reinforced or punished by certain things or events results from a selective history at the phylogenetic level. At the ontogenetic level, experimental analysis has shown that variations in several parameters of reinforcement have an influence on responding—among them, magnitude (including quantity, intensity, and duration), rate, quality, and immediacy (as summarized by Trosclair-Lasserre et al., 2008). Finally, evolving cultural practices establish markedly different contingencies of reinforcement and punishment in different times and places, and thus condition different things and events as more or less reinforcing and punishing in each culture. These patterns are transmitted between successive generations, with varying degrees of repetition and variation.

General phylogenetic susceptibilities for reinforcement and punishment and/or common contingencies among cultures may account for broad agreements about TGB and FBU. “Metals expand when heated” will be generally deemed true to all persons with the proper concepts and contact with heated metals; as Skinner (1971) points out, phylogenetic contingencies are in large part responsible for what we find “good” (nutritious food, sex, security) or “bad” (extreme weather, dangerous environments); and probably also for what we find “beautiful” (the human figure) or “ugly” (Skinner, 1970/1999). While commenting on the history of art and why a picture is reinforcing, Skinner (1970/1999) notes that “the history of art is to a large extent the history of what artists and viewers have found reinforcing. Universality is the universality of reinforcing effects” (p. 347). Whatever “universality” we may find in the emission of TGB and FBU follows the same explanation, regardless of its origin (phylogenetic or ontogenetic/cultural).

Social variables influence the use of TGB and FBU in other ways. The reinforcing magnitude of things and events can only be a direct source of control for verbal responses if we actually interact with those things and events, the interaction having particular consequences. However, we can call many things and events TGB and FBU even if we never interact directly with them—for example, because someone told us they are TGB or FBU. Derived verbal responses that contain TGB and FBU presuppose the prior conditioning of verbal responses containing such words, but many instances of emission of TGB and FBU do not require direct interaction between a person and the thing or event called TGB and FBU. For any single person, then, the probability of emission of TGB and FBU in any given context will be affected not only by personal interaction with things and events called TGB and FBU but also by what they heard about things and events called TGB and FBU from a variety of speakers and by the social consequences of calling things and events TGB and FBU.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In regards to truth, as noted by Guerin (1992), this shift from tacts to intraverbals may explain the counterfactual statements (“virtual worlds”) maintained by practices of reinforcement and punishment of specific verbal

As verbal responses, TGB and FBU are always socially controlled, and any attempt to find “essential meanings” of these words is misguided. From a radical behaviorist viewpoint, even cases of “universality” are not free from perspective, history, and context, as they are also explained through a selective framework. As the power of consequences to reinforce or punish is always historical, relational, and contextual, we must expect a wide variation about what is considered TGB and FBU in different historical periods and among different groups and individuals.

### **TGB and FBU as Different Domains of Verbal Control**

Contingencies of reinforcement and punishment are pervasive—they occur everywhere and all the time. Humans are always looking for positive reinforcers and avoiding negative ones. In non-technical terms, we could say that we are always aiming for TGB things and events; and always avoiding FBU ones.

We could probably make a generally workable distinction between different domains of everyday life in which we use some of these words more frequently than others. That’s what permits Gardner (2012) to make the following remarks:

We realize that something can be true (the fact that over fifty-seven thousand Americans lost their lives in the Vietnam War) without being beautiful or good. By the same token, something can be good without being beautiful—consider a gruesome documentary about prison life intended to shock people into embracing prison reform. And a scene of the natural world, after the demise of all human beings, can be cinematically beautiful, even though it is neither true historically nor good, at least for the species that has been annihilated—that is to say, us. (ch. 1, para. 20)

According to Skinner (1957), “it is a distinction among the kinds of advantages gained by the community which permits us to distinguish between literary and logical and scientific subdivisions” (p. 429). Thus, a community may simultaneously value the “practical consequences” generated by scientists and the “verbal entertainment” generated by poets and story-tellers (p. 429).

However, there is no technical behavior-analytic way to distinguish between “kinds of advantages” beyond the vocabulary established by lay verbal communities. Moreover, lay speakers are not constrained to respect any limits between domains when they speak. Thus, one can call a mathematical proof “beautiful,” an artwork “good,” or an ethical principle “true”—among many other adjectives. Verbal communities may differentially select for the use of some set of words over another in particular contexts (as suggested by Gardner in the passage above), but these words do not define essentially separate, non-overlapping realms of reality (or the mind). Additionally, different verbal communities may emit hundreds of alternative words beyond TGB and FBU to name reinforcing and punishing consequences in different contexts (as we saw in the case of hierarchical classifications). Whether certain stimuli actually increase the probability of emission of certain words is, at least in principle, an empirical matter, but cultural and individual variation is to be expected.

### **Are TGB and FBU “Objective” or “Subjective”?**

For thousands of years, philosophers have been asking if TGB and FBU are “objective” or “subjective.” The question is misleading, for it’s based on what Tourinho (2009) calls one of the “classical psychological dichotomies” that we inherit from the individualistic epistemologies of the Modern Era (rationalism and empiricism): either something is TGB “by itself” or we decide “by ourselves” if that is the case.

Radical behaviorism points to the contextual, relational, and social nature of verbal behavior as the starting point to address the problem: all verbal classifications emerge from our socially mediated interactions with things and events. However, things and events themselves remain unaffected by our verbal responses; they can only affect our behavior (Guerin, 1997). We are all taught by our verbal communities about the social contexts in which the emission of TGB and FBU will or will not be

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communities: “A large part of our lives is now spent talking and writing about the world and its effects, and this is maintained by the effects on other people rather than stimulus control by the non-social environment” (p. 1428).

reinforced. Thus, from a radical behaviorist point of view, it makes no sense to state that “metals expand when heated” is/has true(th); that helping a person is/has good(ness); or that an artwork is/has beauty(iful)—at least not in any ontologically fundamental way. There is no “essence” or “objectivity” of TGB or FBU to be found in things and events we call TGB or FBU. The reinforcing magnitude of things and events for different persons and groups remains to be evaluated, but it depends on the interaction of all the complex variables already examined and is always prone to change. Our individual classifications of TGB and FBU are “subjective” only in the trivial sense that they are the product of unique selective histories—but this implies that they are historical, relational, and contextual. Classifications of TGB and FBU will vary—among individuals, groups, and cultures—in different times and contexts.

### **Extensions of Skinner’s Functional Analyses of TGB and FBU**

To know whether reinforcing things and events actually increase the probability of verbal responses such as TGB and whether punishing things and events actually increase the probability of verbal responses such as FBU is an empirical matter, and the evidence which supports Skinner’s analyses is anecdotal, not experimental. It should then be no surprise to find some exceptions, as we shall see. These exceptions, however, do not disqualify Skinner’s general proposal – they only demand additional functional analyses, some of which are not explicit in Skinner’s works. Moreover, such exceptions can only occur once a general controlling pattern as that suggested by Skinner is already in place. I made the point elsewhere regarding Skinner’s analysis of ethical words:

The assertion that people usually call positive reinforcers “good” and negative reinforcers “bad” does not, of course, entail that this is preceded by a rigorous behavior-analytic judgment about the reinforcing power of things over their behavior. Again, the problem is empirical, and there is no infallibility to defend. If the emission of "good" and "bad" is generally controlled by reinforcing and punishing consequences respectively, then Skinner's point is valid, even with the possibility of exceptions. As noted by Hocutt (1977), Skinner could only write about the "fundamental uses" (p. 322) of "good" and "bad" — if for no other reason, because it would be impossible to explain them all, or even know them all. Thus, Skinner's proposal to identify the "meaning" of "good" and "bad" is, as put by Graham (1977), an "empirical hypothesis" (p. 104). There would be no point for a behavior analyst to offer an essentialist explanation of the "real" meaning of any word. Vargas (1982) is precise about this point: while traditional metaethical theories focus on the logical and formal properties of ethical sentences, behavior analysis is interested in its functional properties — that is, in the variables that control them. Even when they assume a functional stance, traditional metaethical theories tend to single out just one of the many possible controlling variables of ethical talk as responsible for all of its instances. A functional behavior analysis provides for some welcome flexibility in the analysis of ethical talk. (Dittrich, 2016, pp. 15-16)

The same applies to true/false and beautiful/ugly. Skinner’s interpretive analyses could only be wrong if the emission of TGB and FBU was not “generally controlled by reinforcing and punishing consequences respectively”—regardless of exceptions, as long as the exceptions are also functionally explainable.

Lying is a common situation in which we often find someone calling a thing or event TGB, which would otherwise be negatively reinforcing: a politician may give a “true” account of his goals, even if he is not willing to pursue them; a guest calls an unsavory dish "good" for the sake of politeness; someone calls “beautiful” an unattractive work of art while the artist is nearby. It’s not difficult to spot important social variables controlling the occurrence of exceptions like this.

Many other kinds of concurrent contingencies may affect our probability of emitting TGB and FBU. For example, while there are strong contingencies against such behavior, scientists may still present certain statements as “true” even if there is no evidence for them—or even if there’s evidence *against* them. By definition, such statements and theories will not be “practical” or “useful” in dealing with natural or social phenomena. Many parallel social and economic contingencies may explain such responses, from the defense of favored theories to plain fraud. Pseudosciences and fake news are now rampant, and evidence suggests that the assertion of their “truths” is maintained by strong social

reinforcement within particular verbal communities (Lawson et al., 2021; Pennycook et al., 2023).

Concurrent contingencies may also affect our probability of emitting ethical words, as I stated elsewhere:

We can call sugar “bad,” for example, even if it’s highly reinforcing to us. A criminal may insist that crime is “bad,” even while routinely practicing it. The fact that a culture teaches its members to classify certain operants or its products as “bad” obviously does not guarantee that they will not be emitted. Exceptions like these constitute no serious harm to Skinner’s descriptions, as long as we can explain why sugar consumption and crime were considered “bad” in the first place (most probably because other effects of the consumption of sugar and the practice of crime have proven aversive in many ways) and how cultures teach their members to repeat this verbal classification. Again, it would be no surprise to find people saying that sugar or crime are simultaneously “good” and “bad” when they know—verbally, if not from first-hand experience—that, as many other things, sugar and crime may have different effects over time. The practices of verbal communities certainly control our uses of “good” and “bad” in many other ways. (Dittrich, 2016, pp. 13-14)

A similar pattern may occur with aesthetic words. A person may call a thing or event “beautiful” or “ugly” only to conform to social standards or to circumstantial features of an audience, regardless of the reinforcing effects of looking or otherwise contacting the thing or event.

In sum, exceptions to Skinner’s original proposal do not pose a serious problem to it, as long as the relevant controlling relations can be pointed out. Whenever words like TGB and FBU are emitted the task of the behavior analyst is to functionally analyze the emission. Considering the variability of ontogenetic and cultural contingencies selecting verbal operants in human groups and the multiple control of verbal behavior, many other variables beyond those described here may control the emission of TGB and FBU.

### **Description and Prescription Regarding TGB and FBU**

A functional analysis of the variables that actually control the probability of emission of TGB and FBU as verbal responses is different from a proposal or recommendation about specific criteria that *should* control it. In philosophical terms, the first task is descriptive, while the second is prescriptive.<sup>6</sup>

As Skinner (1971) noticed, what actually reinforces the behavior of the members of a group or culture at any given time is an empirical problem: “The effective reinforcers are a matter of observation and cannot be disputed” (p. 128). These reinforcers (TGB and FBU) differ among groups and cultures, and also change over time within the same group or culture. This is a descriptive version of cultural relativism and is completely compatible with radical behaviorism. A descriptive cultural relativist will simply agree, along with Skinner (1971), that “each culture has its own set of goods, and what is good in one culture may not be good in another” (p. 128). The same applies to “true” and “beautiful.”<sup>7</sup>

However, descriptive relativism does not imply prescriptive relativism. Thus, radical behaviorists can also maintain, without contradiction, that we must depend on scientific statements over nonscientific or pseudoscientific ones for most practical purposes.<sup>8</sup> While we can scientifically understand why some people consider absurd statements true (say, the earth is flat) we can still insist that science has developed the most dependable methods for all practical purposes that include the shape of the earth as a relevant variable. And, as noted by Zuriff (1998), the recognition that our

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<sup>6</sup> This distinction has its limits. Descriptions are never neutral or context-free; any description is a result of a long history of selection of verbal practices by specific communities. From this point of view, one may argue that a scientific description, for example, “prescribes” its own conceptual and theoretical features.

<sup>7</sup> The traditional objection is well-known and might emerge even among radical behaviorists: some stances of TGB and FBU are absolute, undisputable, nonrelative. It’s absolutely true that all metals expand when heated; killing other humans is essentially bad; natural landscapes are beautiful regardless of culture. The problem seems especially acute regarding scientific statements: must we not value the hard-won truths of science? I addressed elsewhere the problem of how to reconcile the representational language of science with a pragmatic, contextual, and selective account of scientific behavior (Dittrich, 2020). See also my comments about “universality” in this paper.

<sup>8</sup> As other authors previously noted, however, these purposes must be explicitly stated – otherwise, any reinforcing consequence can count as “practical” (Hayes 1993; Zuriff, 1998).

epistemological criteria are socially and verbally constructed does not imply that we must reject any notion of objectivity in scientific practice.

What about the good and the beautiful? The behavior-analytic literature has some examples of attempts to identify relevant variables controlling artistic production and aesthetic behavior (e.g., Guerin, 2019; Mechner, 2019; Reynolds & Hayes, 2017); however, behavior analysts seldom show any interest in prescribing what *should* be called beautiful or ugly.

Things are different regarding ethics: behavior analysts not only point out relevant variables controlling verbal and nonverbal ethical behavior (e.g., Borba & Tourinho, 2012; Gewirtz & Peláez, 1991; Goldiamond, 1968; Hocutt, 2013; Leigland, 2005; Skinner, 1971) but are also interested in prescribing “good” practices—for its own community, for other groups and, ultimately, for mankind (e.g., Bailey & Burch, 2011; Behavior Analysis Certification Board, 2020; Fawcett, 1991; Holland, 1978; Ruiz, 2013; Skinner, 1971). This prescription can mean either that behavior analysts are recommending more practical ways of achieving already reinforcing consequences or that they are trying to establish as reinforcers some consequences that do not have this function. But here, once again, we must remember that descriptive relativism does not imply prescriptive relativism. To use a simple example, while it's possible to identify relevant variables that explain why even the most hideous practices are promoted by some persons and groups (say, racism), this obviously doesn't equate with acceptance or recommendation of such practices.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as I argued elsewhere (Dittrich, 2016), the fact that behavior analysts can identify the variables that control ethical behavior does not grant them any special moral wisdom and does not imply that they are exempt from ethical discussions—despite Skinner's occasional suggestions to the contrary (1948/1976, pp. 146-147; 1953/2014, p. 445; 1955-1956/1999, p. 29). As I proposed elsewhere, “we must participate in ethical debates as equals—with the right to our own voice, but always open to the voices of any person or group potentially interested in the results of what we do” (Dittrich, 2016, p. 33; on this point, see also Rutherford, 2006).

## Conclusion

The traditional “transcendentals” of philosophy—truth, goodness, and beauty—are interpreted by radical behaviorists as verbal responses selected by their consequences. This perspective confers a central role to the concepts of reinforcement and punishment, and more broadly to selection by consequences. Skinner's basic statement is that reinforcing consequences usually increase the probability of emission of verbal responses like TGB and its correlates, while punishing consequences usually increase the probability of emission of verbal responses like FBU and its correlates. My goal in this article was to explore some implications of this perspective for the treatment of such concepts, which I now summarize.

As reinforcer magnitude may vary over time and in different contexts for a given person, things and events may be classified as more or less TGB or FBU by this person in different contexts and at different points in time. This may lead this person to emit words other than TGB or FBU, in a hierarchical fashion, always according to the practices of different verbal communities.

General phylogenetic tendencies for reinforcement and punishment and/or common contingencies among cultures may account for broad agreements about TGB or FBU, but any attempt to find “essential meanings” of these words is misguided. As verbal responses, TGB and FBU are always socially controlled. For any single person, the probability of emission of TGB and FBU in any given context will be affected not only by personal interaction with things and events called TGB and FBU but also by what they heard about things and events called TGB and FBU from a variety of speakers and by the social consequences of calling things and events TGB and FBU.

A general distinction between domains of applicability of TGB and FBU is probably due to different kinds of advantages (reinforcers) in these domains. However, there is no technical behavior-analytic way to distinguish between them beyond the vocabulary established by lay verbal

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<sup>9</sup> Regarding racism, specifically, many recent examples have shown otherwise (Mizael et al., 2021; Saini & Vance, 2020; Watson-Thompson et al., 2020).

communities, and lay speakers are not constrained to respect any limits between domains when they speak.

TGB and FBU are not “objective” or “subjective”—they are contextual, relational, and social, as all verbal behavior. We are all taught by our verbal communities about the social contexts in which the emission of TGB and FBU will or will not be reinforced. Our individual classifications of TGB and FBU are “subjective” only in the trivial sense that they are the product of unique selective histories. Classifications of TGB and FBU will vary—among individuals, groups, and cultures—in different times and contexts.

We can spot many exceptions to Skinner’s analyses of TGB and FBU. A case in point is concurrent contingencies, including those involved in lying. These exceptions, however, do not disqualify Skinner’s general proposal—they only demand additional functional analyses. Skinner’s interpretive analyses could only be wrong if the emission of TGB and FBU was not “generally controlled by reinforcing and punishing consequences respectively.” Whenever words like TGB and FBU are emitted, the task of the behavior analyst is to functionally analyze the emission.

A descriptive functional analysis of the variables that actually control the probability of emission of TGB and FBU as verbal responses is different from a prescriptive proposal or recommendation about specific criteria that *should* control it. Descriptive relativism about TGB and FBU does not imply prescriptive relativism about them.

As a whole, these implications characterize radical behaviorism as a distinctive and unorthodox proposal in the traditional philosophical landscape regarding the “transcendentals.” They are not essences or “fundamental properties of being,” but verbal responses selected by their consequences, and thus dependent on history and context. A radical behaviorist perspective about these responses is necessary if we are to identify its controlling variables and develop behavioral approaches to many of the traditional problems of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics.

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