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Setting the Record Straight

The Social Views of B. F. Skinner

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Skinner suggested that it is punishment that people find objectionable and against which they rebel, rather than simply the fact that our behavior is under external control. Positive reinforcement leads to voluntary cooperation. Hostile reactions to Skinner's message may reflect confusion of his opposition to autonomous action as a scientific concept with opposition to behavior described as autonomous. *Negative reactions toward science, psychology, and the use of "lower" animals to understand human behavior may also have played a role. Properly understood, Skinner was much closer to the libertarian than to the totalitarian end of the political spectrum.*

Although Skinner's contributions to psychology were many and varied, obituaries appearing in the popular press made little mention of the achievements for which he is known within the psychological community (Dinsmoor, in press) but concentrated instead on his suggestions for improving the structure of society. His reputation with the general public seems to rest mainly on two books: *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Skinner, 1971) appeared for a number of weeks on the national best-seller lists, and *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948/1962) has been translated into a variety of languages, with total sales said to approach two and a half million copies.

Walden Two

In *Walden Two,* a fictional group consisting of two professors, two returning veterans, and two women in whom the veterans are romantically interested, take a trip from a university campus to visit a utopian community. T. E. Frazier, the founder of the community, takes them on a guided tour, expounding along the way on how the community works and debating its merits with the two professors, one of whom serves as his intellectual antagonist, the other as the book's narrator.

The book had three main themes. The first of these, logically speaking, was that society could profitably make use of contemporary knowledge about human behavior to enlist the cooperation of its citizens in achieving such goals as conserving resources, reducing personal competition, educating the young, lifting the special burdens placed on women, eliminating economic exploitation, ending class distinctions, and preventing nuclear war. (The chapter dealing with racial issues was deleted, in order to shorten the book prior to publication [Skinner, 1979, p. 330].) It seems to me that it would be difficult for most people engaged in psychology as a profession to quarrel with that point of view.

Second, there was considerable emphasis on the idea that an experimental community like Walden Two could serve as a rough equivalent of a psychological laboratory, in which a variety of living arrangements, both physical and social, could be tested and compared. (For a living example of how such an experimental community might work out in practice, see Comunidad los Horcones, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1989a, 1989b.)

That idea was novel and interesting, but there was a third message that has always seemed to me (see Dinsmoor, 1991b) to be still more radical in its implications. That was Skinner's assertion, speaking through the voice of Frazier, that the aversive techniques used up to that time by almost all institutions throughout human history were not only oppressive but also, in the long run, ineffective. Skinner maintained that punishment did not work (but see Azrin & Holz, 1966; Dinsmoor, 1955). In its place, he urged the substitution of positive reinforcement. It is control by aversive techniques that is harmful and oppressive, he argued, not the mere fact that one person's actions are influenced by those of another.

> We have no vocabulary of freedom in dealing with what we want to do. . . . The question never arises. When men strike for freedom, they strike against jails and the police, or the threat of them—against oppression. They never strike against forces which make them want to act the way they do. (Skinner, 1948/1962, p. 263)

Social Values

Leafing through the pages of *Walden Two,* one repeatedly and consistently runs across values of the sort that would conventionally be classified as liberal or possibly even radical. Walden Two was a socialist society. The means of production were owned in common, and the goal of the bakers, for example, was not to produce bread as cheaply as possible, in order to turn a profit, but to prepare

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a tasty and nutritious food for community consumption. The free market system of distribution was criticized as extremely wasteful (Skinner, 1948/1962, p. 62), and competition was discouraged.

Although Skinner's emphasis on art, music, science, and literature as major components of the good life may reveal his class origins, he was profoundly egalitarian in his sympathies, with a great deal of concern for those less fortunate in their circumstances. He rejected class distinctions. For example, Frazier, who presented Skinner's own views throughout the book, "was never happy in being waited on" (p. 57). In Walden Two, labor was reduced by both physical and social engineering, and what was left was divided among the members of the community rather than assigned to a special stratum of the population who were paid a correspondingly miserable wage. Even those members serving as Planners, Managers, and Scientists—characterized (perhaps after Watson, e.g., 1924, pp. 180 ff.) as "small-muscle users"—were required to earn a portion of their work-credits by physical labor. "It's our constitutional guarantee that the problems of the big-muscle user will not be forgotten" (p. 59). "We have no leisure class" (p. 60), Frazier continues, as there could be none "except through some form of slavery" (p. 76). It was the working-class couple, comparing conditions with those they faced back home, who were the first of the visitors to join the community: "Do you know what we've got to go back to in the city?" (p. 182).

Writing in the 1940s, Skinner was also well ahead of the times in his support of women's liberation (see pp. 146–148). In Walden Two, the sexes were equal (p. 54) and shared the same tasks (p. 133). "We have broken down prejudices regarding the occupations of the sexes and we have worked particularly hard to keep a balance in the nursery and the school system" (p. 145). Normally, half of the Board of Governors was female. Because the community as a whole performed more efficiently many of the tasks that had formerly been assigned to individual women within their family units, such as preparing the meals and caring for the young, what Skinner called "housewifery" was greatly reduced. Women were free to spend the greater part of their lives outside of the home (p. 63). In today's context, these may not seem like radical ideas, but at the time Skinner wrote, I believe they were.

The ecologically balanced pond and the saving of resources by community living (pp. 21–23) are anticipatory of today's concern with conservation and the preservation of the environment. (In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* Skinner placed greater emphasis on these issues.)

Had Skinner been insensitive to human liberty as a political value, as his critics alleged, he might well have endorsed collective planning as practiced at that time in the Soviet Union. However, during a period when a great many professed liberals retained their wartime admiration for Stalin's regime, Skinner rejected its techniques of social control:

> In order to get its people to act as the communist pattern demands, the Russian government has had to use the techniques of capitalism. On the one hand it resorts to extravagant and uneven rewards. . . . On the other hand, the government also uses punishment or the threat of it. (Skinner, 1948/1962, p. 276)

Surprisingly, in view of subsequent charges, there was also evidence in the book of Skinner's sympathy with a historic figure noted for his defiance of civil authority. Henry David Thoreau, in whose honor Skinner's fictional community was named, was the author not only of the first book to bear the *Walden* title but also of an essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (e.g., Thoreau, 1854/1983, 1849/1983). That essay, according to Woodcock's history of libertarian thought, "has remained one of the classic justifications of passive and principled resistance to authority" (Woodcock, 1962/1986, pp.388–389). "We chose our name in honor of Thoreau's experiment," says Frazier. "It was an experiment in living, and it sprang from a similar doctrine of our relation to the state" (Skinner, 1948/1962, p. 223). Elsewhere, responding to the possibility of foreign invasion, his ultimate resort seems to have been passive resistance (p. 204), a tactic that depends upon popular support rather than institutional authority.

All in all, Skinner's concerns for social justice and for human welfare were so evident that one would expect critics to have been cautious in jumping to negative conclusions and to have been gentle if they did. One would also expect them to have made a conscientious effort to understand what Skinner was saying in other passages in which they may have found his message less clear, but this does not seem to have been the case. Although it seems obvious that Skinner was one of their own, liberals have often been just as enraged by his writings as have conservatives.

The Critics React

The first few reviews of the book were temperate and balanced. But an editorial appearing in *Life* set the tone for many of those that were to follow:

> The menace of the mechanical baby tender is as nothing compared to the menace of books like *Walden Two.* For Dr. Skinner's utopia is a triumph of "cultural engineering" and "behavioral engineering" where the conditioned reflex is king. Boards of Planners unobtrusively tell every big and little Skinnerite exactly what he or she must do. Once they are trained, the inhabitants of *Walden Two* have "freedom." But it is the freedom of those Pavlovian dogs which are free to foam at the mouth whenever the "dinner" bell invites them to a nonforthcoming meal. The very possibility of random personal choice has been eliminated. ("The Newest Utopia," 1949, p. 38)

Because it appeared in a periodical with wide circulation, it is possible that this editorial and a companion piece in *Fortune* (Jessup, 1948) served as a call to arms to other writers who shared Jessup's basic concepts and values, alerting them to the apparent danger and mobilizing them for the attack. In any case, Jessup's reviews were followed by a chorus of condemnation. For example, in *The Quest for Utopia,* Negley and Patrick (1952) declared that

This is indeed the behaviorally engineered society, and while it was to be expected that sooner or later the principle of psychological conditioning would be made the basis of a serious construction of utopia . . . not even the effective satire of Huxley is adequate preparation for the shocking horror of the idea when positively presented. Of all the dictatorships espoused by utopists, this is the most profound, and incipient dictators might well find in this utopia a guidebook of political practice. (p. 590)

Similar sentiments were expressed by Donald C. Williams (1949) in *The Philosophical Review,* Joseph Wood Krutch (1953) in a book entitled *The Measure of Man,* and Andrew Hacker (1955) in *The Journal of Politics.*

Years later, when the controversy was revived by the publication of a second book dealing with many of the same issues (Skinner, 1971), it became clear that the critics still had not mellowed. They continued to attack *Walden Two* in the most vehement of terms. For example, *Time* characterized Frazier as "the undemocratic creator of a controlled society" ("Skinner's Utopia," 1971, p. 50). The *National Lampoon* published a parody in which Walden Two was likened to a Nazi concentration camp ("Beneath Freedom and Dignity," 1973). And Richard L. Rubenstein (1971), writing in *Psychology Today,* warned that

if the conflicts of race, class and life-style continue to intensify, a majority may turn to a controller who promises salvation through total control. *Walden Two* might then be the prototype of America. There would be few pockets of racial or ideological nonconformity. The deviants would have been segregated in such *de facto* concentration camps as urban ghettos, or eliminated altogether. (p. 96)

Beyond Freedom and Dignity

The second book (Skinner, 1971) was an attempt to deal more directly with many of the same issues, without the fictional setting of *Walden Two.* Skinner resumed his attack on the use of punishment or the threat of punishment as instruments of social policy. This time, however, he dug more deeply into the problem, examining its roots, the underlying beliefs that prevented people from making the adjustments he thought were necessary for the survival of our culture.

In his opening remarks, Skinner argued that we cannot rely on advances in the physical and biological sciences, by themselves, to solve such problems as the pollution of the environment, the difficulties and outright hazards of ghetto living, hunger, disease, the population explosion, and nuclear war. We must change our social practices, and to do that we must make use of current advances in our understanding of human behavior.

Inner Agents Versus Environmental Determination

The main barrier to a scientific analysis of behavior, according to Skinner, is mankind's age-old belief in the autonomous causal role played by some inner agent hidden within the individual. Let me put it this way: Although a private experience of freedom of choice may be completely compatible with determinism as a scientific doctrine, the theoretical concept of a free, autonomous agent is not. Such a concept contradicts and cannot logically coexist with a determinist point of view. It is therefore difficult even to express the idea of autonomy in such a way that it quite makes sense to a scientist. But the assumption of human autonomy appears to be deeply imbedded in the remainder of our culture. The layperson takes it for granted that human beings are not merely products of their heredity and their environment but something beyond that, that they are in some sense free to act as they please. They are like the playwright's deus ex machina, gods that swoop down from the heavens and arbitrarily alter the orderly course of events. Like spontaneous combustion, they are somehow initiators rather than merely links in the causal chain: They are originators, prime movers, creators, arbitrary intervenors in the web of nature.

According to Skinner, we must abandon the attempt to explain human behavior by appealing to the hypothetical inner states so beloved by popular psychology. Instead, we must turn to conditions that can be observed and can be altered to predict and to control what people will do. Scientific psychology takes it as a working assumption that behavior is lawful, that it is functionally related to antecedent events. Its task is to describe those relations, and the further it advances toward that end the less there remains to be attributed to unknown and possibly capricious factors said to reside within the human psyche.

As Skinner pointed out, it took many centuries for our civilization to detect the role played by the environment in selecting the innate behavioral patterns of various species through their reproductive success; similarly, it remains difficult today to recognize the role played by the environment in selecting learned behavior through different qualities and contingencies of reinforcement. It is interesting that both Darwin in the 19th century (see, e.g., Ellegard, 1958; Hofstadter & Metzger, 1955) and Skinner in the 20th have been met with cries of anguish from outside the scientific community. It would seem that both biological determinism and behavioral determinism are viewed as threats to the unique, almost divine status accorded by so many of us to our own species, a race subject to punishment for their sins but entitled to praise for their accomplishments. "Any evidence that a person's behavior may be attributed to external circumstances seems to threaten his dignity or worth" (Skinner, 1971, p. 44). "We react to those who deprive us of due credit by protesting, opposing, or condemning them and their practices" (p. 54).

Social Control

The implication of a deterministic psychology is that human behavior is always under some kind of control, sometimes haphazard, sometimes systematic. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* Skinner developed this theme at some length and in considerable detail. In many cases, the control is socially mediated, as in interactions between friends, workmates, or lovers, or, more hierarchically, be-

tween parent and child, teacher and student, or therapist and client. Day in and day out, people do control the behavior of other people. Unfortunately, as Skinner noted, individual behavior is sensitive to the consequences for that individual, rather than to the general welfare, and to those consequences that are most immediate rather than to those that are further removed in time, even though the latter may remain greater in magnitude. (For a recent review of the literature on the interaction between delay and magnitude of reinforcement, see Logue, 1988.) Deliberate intervention by some agency of society as a whole is needed to direct our behavior toward the longer term goals and to place limits on personal greed and selfishness in the interest of the common good.

Although Skinner did not make the point, I think it may also be important to add that when the interests of different individuals are in conflict, a gain in freedom for one may result in a loss of freedom for the other. Consider slavery, for example, or rape. The freedom of one person to control another by coercive techniques reduces the freedom of the second person. Other, if sometimes less glaring, examples may readily be found within contemporary society. No person should be granted the unrestricted freedom to restrict the freedom of another.

It is for reasons like this that social institutions, themselves patterns of behavioral interaction, have been constructed. The essence of a social institution is that the behavior of its individual members is altered in some way to conform to a collective end. If it did not alter behavior, the institution would have no function and indeed no existence. By definition, all social institutions control behavior.

"The importance of the literature of freedom," Skinner noted, "can scarcely be questioned" (Skinner, 1971, p. 31). It has played a useful role in fanning the flames of revolt against the use of coercive techniques by centralized authority. But it has made the mistake of taking the control of behavior, per se, as the target of its attack, rather than the aversive techniques by which that control has typically been exercised.

Reviews of the Second Book

As reviews of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* began to appear, it became clear that Skinner was entirely correct in assessing the levels of emotion he had aroused. In a fairly accurate and objective article in the *New York Times,* William K. Stevens (1971) nontheless predicted that

> Dr. Skinner's thesis is sure to raise howls of opposition from the humanists and libertarians who have long opposed his behavioral psychology and who are likely to see in his latest proposals the specter of a scientific police state right out of "1984" and "Brave New World." (p. 29)

In a nationally syndicated column, James J. Kilpatrick declared that "the human race may indeed be headed for catastrophe if it continues along its present disorderly course, but it surely would find catastrophe of a different sort if it yields to Controller Skinner's grand design" (Kilpatrick, 1971, p. A5). In a column distributed by United Press International, Louis Cassels (1971) condemned Skinner's utopia by contrasting it with

> our present democratic society, which is based, you will recall, on the premise that all men are created free and equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. (p. 8)

On its cover for September 20, 1971, *Time* proclaimed "B. F. Skinner says: We can't afford freedom." Inside was a seven-page survey of Skinner's life and work, written in a similar vein ("Skinner's Utopia," 1971). The effect of this article on its readers may be judged by the reaction of some anonymous person on the Indiana University campus who was moved to create an effigy of Skinner and hang it, with the article pinned to it, from a tree in front of the Psychology Building. Nearly 20 years later, in its obituary section, *Time* summed up Skinner's contributions to society by saying "He called for restricting many individual liberties so that a Utopian society based on his principles of social engineering could be created" (Milestones, 1990, p. 72).

In *Psychology Today,* which had previously carried a synopsis of the book, publisher T. George Harris (1971) declared that

> the model he urges for survival is a totally controlled, antidemocratic society. . . . Thousands of psychologists and sociologists, a body of equalitarian and democratic people, not only contend with Skinner but fear him. The general public, some argue, will decide that all social scientists want a Big Brother dictatorship. (p. 37)

In the same journal, Richard L. Rubenstein (1971) concluded his review with the warning, "His utopian projection is less likely to be a blueprint for the Golden Age than for the theory and practice of hell" (p. 96). It was probably no accident that the phrase "the theory and practice of hell" exactly reproduced the title of a book on Nazi concentration camps (Kogon, 1950).

In an address to the Farm Bureau, Spiro T. Agnew (1972) declared that

> Skinner attacks the very precepts on which our society is based. . . . To the behaviorist, man is not an individual; he is one of a herd, a particle in a mass of humanity who does not know what is good for him and who needs to be saved from himself by a superior elite using intellectual cattle prods. (p. 84)

On the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, Cornelius Gallagher went so far as to attack the funding of Skinner's research as "advancing ideas which threaten the future of our system of government" (American Psychological Association, 1971).

Interestingly enough, Noam Chomsky, who is relatively sophisticated on political matters, devoted most of his long and acrimonious review in *The New York Review* to an attack on the scientific status of Skinner's psychology, rather than on his social views. At the very end, however, he did go on to caution his readers, somewhat elliptically, that

> The public . . . may even choose to be misled into agreeing that concern for freedom and dignity must be abandoned. . . .

The tendencies in our society that lead toward submission to authoritarian rule may prepare individuals for a doctrine that can be interpreted as justifying it. (Chomsky, 1971, p. 24)

Sources of Misunderstanding

Why has Skinner been so grossly misinterpreted? A contributing factor may have been the challenging or perhaps even provocative tone assumed by his alter ego, Frazier, in *Walden Two* and more directly by the author himself in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity.* I suspect that Skinner enjoyed being the center of a controversy. Clearly, he was something of an iconoclast; throughout his life, he questioned accepted truths and rebelled against stuffy orthodoxies. In his chapter in *A History of Psychology in Autobiography* (Skinner, 1967), for example, he described a series of hoaxes he perpetrated against various campus authorities during his undergraduate days at Hamilton College. Obviously, he liked to needle the powers that be and to shock those with more conventional points of view. As he himself once admitted at a testimonial dinner for Fred S. Keller, he tended to take an extreme position and then wait to be shot down. He stuck to the word *control* throughout both of his books, even when it became obvious that this word upset his critics and that the substitution of a less emotionally laden term might have had a calming influence. (I have continued to use the word in the present context because it is woven into the history of the conflict. In any case, by now it may be too late to remedy the situation.) And surely no one could adopt a title like *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* without being aware that it implies some kind of critical stance toward two of contemporary society's most sacred images.

By baiting his adversaries, Skinner captured their attention and became what is known as a controversial figure. Perhaps as a result, his ideas, although often distorted in transmission, have reached a relatively large number of people. Finley Carpenter, one of his more thoughtful critics, has gone so far as to suggest that Skinner may deliberately have goaded his adversaries in order to provoke hasty and ill-considered responses. Carpenter portrayed him as having possibly thought along the following lines:

> They will . . . say things that are not carefully conceived because they will be under my aversive stimulus. I will cause them to think in a shoddy and defensive way. And after their heat of anger has subsided the most intelligent among them will be sheepishly aware of having displayed weaknesses they would fain deny. (Carpenter, 1974, p. xiv)

Alas, if that was Skinner's strategy, it does not appear to have worked. None of his critics, to my knowledge, has published second thoughts.

Difficulty in Understanding Novel Ideas

There is more to it than that, however. Another source of misunderstanding, I suspect, is that Skinner's analysis of social issues constituted such a radical departure from anything that had been said before. His ideas were genuinely novel. His conceptual categories were foreign to the majority of his reviewers and cut across the boundaries of those they normally used. Members of the press and social and literary critics—most of whom lacked a background in scientific psychology, let alone in learning theory—must have found it difficult to think in terms of these newly presented categories and may have dealt with the problem by translating his message into one they could more readily assimilate. They found it easier to substitute their preconceptions of what a person like Skinner would say than to understand what Skinner was, in fact, saying.

This tendency was very apparent in some of the obituaries. For example, in my interview with a representative of the *Indiana Daily Student* I stressed, above all else, that Skinner was opposed to the use of punishment as a method of social control and that he advocated replacing it with something he called *positive reinforcement.* She wrote that Skinner favored the use of "reward and punishment" to construct a new social order (Kightlinger, 1990). So did the authors of other obituaries I have read. Somehow the message that had always seemed to me (see Dinsmoor, 1991b) to be central to Skinner's social writings and that was certainly prominent in both of his books was set aside and a direct contradiction put in its place.

These, of course, were journalists, who do not always have the time to study a topic carefully enough to write a completely accurate account. A more revealing example may be Joseph Wood Krutch's interpretation of the role of conditioning in Walden Two. Perhaps he had Skinner's society confused with that portrayed by Aldous Huxley (1932). (For similar confusions, see also Negley & Patrick, 1952; "The Newest Utopia," 1949.) In Krutch's account, it was not behavior that was controlled, but thought. Note particularly that, in line with his experimental approach, Skinner had explicitly ruled out resort to indoctrination or propaganda as incompatible with an objective evaluation of alternative social arrangements (1948/1962, pp. 207–210, 275). Nevertheless, in Krutch's version, conditioning was used not so much to direct people's behavior toward socially desirable objectives (operant or instrumental conditioning) as to alter their preferences and values (Pavlovian conditioning). "*Walden Two* . . . describes the contented life led by the inmates of an institution where they are conditioned to like being conditioned" (Krutch, 1953, p. 57). The citizens' "desires, tastes, convictions and ideals are precisely what the experimenter wants to make them" (p. 62; see also pp. 65, 68, 70, 74).

In particular, the difficulty of coping with novel ideas may have led to distorted perceptions of what Skinner was saying about human autonomy. By expressing his opposition to this concept, Skinner did not mean that he was opposed to what we call a free society or to human beings acting in contravention of established authority. He meant that the concept of autonomy stood in the way of a better understanding of human behavior. It did not provide a viable way of organizing the facts and should therefore be abandoned. However, some critics apparently took him to mean that he disapproved of and wished to abandon the behavioral content that they had tried to

incorporate under that heading. Skinner was castigated for rejecting the goals of freedom and autonomy when all he really did was to question their value as categories to be used in thinking about human behavior.

Emotional Biases

Emotional attitudes, too, may have colored reviewer perceptions. First, among members of the general public there appears to be a widespread feeling of suspicion and even hostility toward science in general (see, e.g., Ellegard, 1958; Krutch, 1929; White, 1896/1978), and in particular toward the application of scientific values and techniques to the human condition. In a poll conducted by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan, 40% of the respondents agreed that "Scientists are apt to be odd and peculiar people" and 25% agreed that "Scientists always seem to be prying into things they really ought to stay out of" (Withey, 1959, p. 388).

To reach the most accurate possible conclusions and to reach them as quickly as possible, scientists typically attempt to suppress their personal biases, cultivating a relatively aloof, detached point of view toward their subject matter. I suppose that when it is human behavior that is under consideration, this dispassionate attitude may be interpreted as a lack of empathy and an absence of concern. Invoking "Dr. Faustus, Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Moreau, Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Cyclops, Dr. Caligari, Dr. Strangelove," Roszak (1974), for example, suggested that "In these images of our popular culture resides a legitimate public fear of the scientist's stripped-down, depersonalized conception of knowledge" (p. 31). Roszak also quoted a passage from *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* that he interpreted to mean "that the way forward for psychology is to stop personifying people" (p. 30). In his newspaper column, Kilpatrick (1971) described the same book as being "as cold as the stainless steel tables of a morgue" (p. A5). He even faulted Skinner for using a technical language to communicate with his readers. Although the word *controlee* appeared only two or three times in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* Kilpatrick described it as "Skinner's word for the human being" (p. A5). Such terms as *a science of behavior* and *behavioral engineering* also seem to have set off strong negative reactions.

Fear of psychology. Another reason for the alarm and hostility that have greeted Skinner's social writings may be that he was a psychologist by profession. In the previously cited survey of attitudes toward science and scientists, Withey (1959) found that "when respondents were directly queried, only about 1 in 2 would go along with the notion that we can ever really understand human behavior through scientific study" (p. 383). Moreover, 40% agreed with the statement that "The growth of science means that a few people could control our lives" (p. 387). Although Wood, Jones, and Benjamin (1986) found that 91% of their respondents held generally favorable attitudes toward psychology, they also reported that 60% considered psychology to be inconsistent with their religious beliefs and that only 58% "believed that psychology has *not* [italics added] been used primarily to control and manipulate people" (p. 950). This figure seems to leave a substantial residue of people who believed that psychology *has* been used primarily to control and manipulate people. If these respondents were interpreting the word *control* the way Skinner used it, their judgment would simply have reflected the facts: Most applications of psychology do involve attempts to change people's behavior. On the other hand, when coupled with the word *manipulate,* the word *control* takes on a somewhat sinister ring, and in the popular usage endorsement of such a statement suggests a suspicion bordering on paranoia. Wood et al. (1986) found that the fear of manipulation and control was more common among their less educated respondents and, not surprisingly, that there was a significant negative correlation between this fear and favorable attitudes toward the profession (p. 951).

Anthropocentrism. There is an atmosphere of human chauvinism in many of the reviews. Critics appear to have been offended by the application of principles derived from the rat and the pigeon to an understanding of human behavior. Often they cited Skinner's research background, even though it did not appear in either book. Genetically, the human species is drawn from the same pool as other forms of animal life. It shares a common heritage, and it has been subject to very similar evolutionary pressures. One has only to look at how we eat, breathe, see, hear, feel, taste, smell, digest, eliminate, coordinate, and procreate to see how closely we resemble other animals, at least within the mammalian range, from the fine detail of our constituent fluids and tissues to the organization of our major anatomical structures. We carry out the same basic functions by much the same means. Medicine makes extensive use of other species to study human diseases and their treatment, and four of the five historic figures exerting the greatest influence on 20th-century psychology, according to a poll of the members of the American Psychological Association (Wright, 1970), worked with nonhuman subjects. (For the rationale for using other species as experimental subjects, see Dinsmoor, 1991a; for some findings with direct application to human concerns, see Domjan, 1987; Ferster, Culbertson, & Boren, 1975). To biologists and psychologists, the human animal is continuous with the rest of nature.

However, religiously oriented writers, scholars trained in the humanities, and members of the general public often take a profoundly different view. Although they may be cognizant of the basic facts of evolution, they have not entirely abandoned the traditional pre-Darwinian view of members of their own species as possessing indefinable spiritual attributes that set them apart from and place them on a higher plane than the "lower" animals. For example, in his commentary, Cassels (1971) reacted to Skinner's 1971 book as follows: "The scriptures sacred to both Christians and Jews state unequivocally that man is a special kind of creature, akin to the animals but also bearing within him a free spirit 'in the image of God' . . . the crowning achievement of nature" (p. A8, 1971). The exalted status that these writers confer upon

the human species is reminiscent of the medieval view of the earth as the center of the universe or the ethnocentrism of 18th- and 19th-century Europeans, who used their knowledge of firearms to kill, plunder, and enslave the inhabitants of other continents, from Asia and Africa to Australia and the Americas.

For critics with this kind of perspective, to treat the human race as comparable in any way to the members of other species is apparently an insult, revealing a deep disdain for those qualities that make us superior to other forms of animal life. As Negley and Patrick (1952) put it, commenting on *Walden Two,* "We have descended from the heights of confidence in man's capacities and noble aspiration for his progressive betterment to a nadir of ignominy in which he is placed on a par with pigeons" (p. 590). In his column on *Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* Kilpatrick (1971) concluded that

> Skinner's monumental error, in my own view, lies in his scientist's assumption that man is essentially no more than another mouse in a cage. If the behavior of a mouse can be altered by controlled changes, it follows that man's behavior can be altered also. (p. A5)

Similarly, in *Psychology Today,* Harris (1971) complained that Skinner's "totally controlled, antidemocratic society [is] based upon the notion that man is brother to the lab rat" (p. 37). The most blatant attempt to exploit popular antipathy toward the use of behavioral data from nonhuman subjects may be found in *Time*'s review ("Skinner's Utopia," 1971), which was introduced by two pictures, side by side, one captioned "Conditioned Rat" and the other "Conditioned Man."

Totalitarian or Libertarian?

The prevailing opinion among people who know Skinner's views only by hearsay seems to be that he was insidiously totalitarian. He has been portrayed in that way over and over again. Perhaps this reaction is understandable—it is difficult for people to believe that the summaries they have read can be so wide of the mark. If it appears in print, it must be so.

I have been a member for many years of a variety of organizations dedicated to the preservation of civil liberties, both at home and abroad, and I have been arrested on two occasions for peacefully protesting governmental policies. (On the second occasion, Skinner heard about it on the radio and wrote to offer his help.) However, my reading of Skinner's views is completely different from those who have described him as authoritarian. It is true that he felt that the survival of our culture is threatened by waste, pollution, the population explosion, and nuclear war and that he thought that our scientific knowledge of human behavior should be used to combat those dangers. I have even managed to find two sentences in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* in which he called for an increase in "control" to deal with such matters. But that was far from the major thrust of either of the books discussed in this article, and it is characteristic of all proponents of social change. Even civil libertarians frequently propose various forms of countercontrol to curtail activities that threaten freedom of expression.

I have found that most people's attitudes toward the level of social control are not general across the board but depend on the issue in question. One group wishes to suppress driving while intoxicated, another sexual behavior of various kinds, a third removal of a problem fetus before delivery, a fourth financial contributions to political candidates by special interest groups, a fifth prayer in public schools, a sixth the burning of the national flag, and a seventh the practice of psychology without a license. Whether we favor an increase or a decrease in control depends in each instance upon our attitude toward the legitimacy of the activity in question. So it was with Skinner.

In both books, Skinner raised and gave considerable prominence to a truly novel and radical theme. The issue he raised was not whether we should increase or decrease our efforts to control behavior, but what form that control should take. This is the point on which most of his critics have remained strangely silent. Perhaps they did not recognize the importance of the issue, or perhaps they did not feel competent to deal with it. Throughout recorded history, if we are to trust those records, governing authorities have relied mainly on the use of force and the imposition of punishment to bring people's behavior into line with their objectives, whatever they might be. Skinner maintained that it is the use of aversive techniques that is oppressive (see also Sidman, 1989). The control, as he still called it, exerted by positive reinforcement was not in itself subject to the same objection.

Libertarians should welcome this analysis. It is true that the most consistent of the voices for freedom, the classic anarchist philosophers, concentrated their attention more on the objectionable characteristics of existing societies than on the characteristics they envisaged for the society of the future, but even these writers recognized the need for some kind of mechanism to bring about the cooperation of different members of the community for the common good. Although the language is different, they drew a sharp distinction between what they called "coercion" and what they called "voluntary cooperation" (Woodcock, 1962/1986), and that distinction seems very much like the distinction that Skinner drew between aversive control and positive reinforcement.

It was on the basis of field studies of animal behavior, interestingly enough, that Pyotr Kropotkin (1902/1987) developed his well-known principle of mutual aid. Although he was aware of the competition among members of different species to which Thomas Huxley and the social Darwinists made their appeal, he claimed that mutual assistance was the more typical relation among members of the same species (e.g., differentiation of function in colonies of insects, hunting in packs, alarm calls to warn of predators, caring for the young). He argued that this trait contributed to the survival and reproduction of a given form of life, including the human species, and that it was therefore selectively transmitted to future generations. It was only human nature, therefore, to help one

another. Skinner proposed another mechanism—one that does not depend on the effect of selective consequences on the innate characteristics of our species but on the effect of selective consequences on the behavior learned by its individual members.

By many of his critics, Skinner has been portrayed as a totalitarian. However, if he was right about the significance of the distinction between positive reinforcement and aversive control, then he ended up being much closer to the libertarian end of the political spectrum. That I am not being completely idiosyncratic in espousing such a point of view is attested by the comments of Alex Comfort (1973), probably the best known of contemporary anarchists:

> Although he is not himself an anarchist, the society he postulates could be truly in line with anarchist (not totalitarian) insights . . . Anarchists are opposed, in principle, to aversive government, not to education, and they favor the inner-directed man, substituting mutual aid for free competition and direct action for centralism. In essence, Skinner is answering the libertarian or anarchist dilemma—how to educate men to be social without the use of a coercive apparatus. (p. 207)

Not lightly to be dismissed, either, is Skinner's own appraisal. In a flight of fancy published in 1985, Skinner portrayed Eric Blair (better known as George Orwell) as having staged his reported death in 1950 and retired from public life to join Walden Two. Eventually, Blair sought out Skinner's alter ego, T. E. Frazier, the founder of the community, and the following interaction took place:

> What had impressed Blair and brought him to Walden Two was the lack of any institutionalized government, religion, or economic system. That had been the dream of nineteenth-century anarchism, but it had gone wrong. Evidently it had gone right in Walden Two.
>
> "You are the perfect anarchist," Blair said to Frazier one day.
>
> "I'll agree," said Frazier. . . . "Walden Two is state ownership without a state. Its members are not employed because there is no employer. They come into direct contact with the world, as people did before there were governments, religions, or industries." (Skinner, 1985, pp. 6–7)

Problems with Positive Reinforcement

Even if positive reinforcement is vastly to be preferred to aversive techniques of social control, I think it would be dangerous to conclude that the substitution of one method for the other would solve all of our problems. A more pleasant method of control does not guarantee that there will be no exploitation of one person by another. The possibility must be considered that the power to reinforce could become concentrated in the hands of one person or a small group of people and used to produce substantial inequities in goods and services.

I am not sure how carefully Skinner had considered, at the time he wrote *Walden Two,* the possibility that even positive reinforcement might be used for selfish ends. In that book, he suggested that the power of any would-be dictator was severely limited: "If he takes any step which reduces the sum total of human happiness, his power is reduced by a like amount. What better check against a malevolent despotism could you ask for?" (Skinner, 1948/1962, p. 264); and later, "What a strange discovery for a would-be tyrant . . . that the only effective technique of control is unselfish" (p. 289). Given a background of evolutionary selection, there is presumably some correlation between what is reinforcing and what is good for the individual whose behavior is being reinforced. I think, however, that Skinner exaggerated the consistency of this relationship. My point may be illustrated by the plot of the classic German film *Die Blaue Engel.* A lovesick schoolmaster, played by Emil Jannings, is destroyed by a heartless entertainer, played by Marlene Dietrich. The story is fictional, of course, but to many people it rings true. In similar vein, participation in a juvenile gang is apparently reinforcing to many adolescents, but whether it is beneficial is problematic. Sniffing glue or joining the army may be reinforcing but can sometimes be fatal.

By the time of his debate with Carl Rogers, Skinner had arrived at a different answer:

> The dangers in the control of human behavior are very real. The possibility of misuses of scientific knowledge must always be faced. We cannot escape by denying the power of a science of behavior or arresting its development. . . . The new techniques emerging from a science of behavior must be subject to the explicit counter-control which has already been applied to earlier and cruder forms. Brute force and deception, for example, are now fairly generally suppressed by ethical practices and by explicit governmental and religious agencies. A similar counter-control of scientific knowledge in the interests of the group is a feasible and promising possibility. Although we cannot say how devious the course of its evolution may be, a cultural pattern of control and counter-control will presumably emerge which will be most widely supported because it is most widely reinforcing. (Skinner, 1956/1972, p. 33)

It is not all that clear to me that brute force and deception have been outlawed as techniques to be used in the important areas of national and international politics, for example, but without contesting the desirability of countercontrol I will propose a somewhat different strategy.

I feel that the cries of alarm that have greeted Skinner's social writings have done a decided disservice to the libertarian cause. Friends of liberty should have applauded and promoted Skinner's call for the elimination of coercive techniques. By ignoring that message, his critics have delayed its implementation. Also, by alleging that what Skinner advocated was control itself, rather than a change in the nature of that control, they have implied that in contemporary society people are relatively free of social constraints, whether by positive reinforcement or by aversive techniques. By raising a false issue they have distracted us from the real issue: By whom and for whose benefit is our behavior controlled?

Some forms of control are heavily instrumented. Such tools as radio stations, television transmitters, printing presses, military weaponry, police forces, mental

institutions, and prisons involve physical installations that can seized and used by a small minority to control the behavior of other members of society. Consider Germany under Hitler or the Soviet Union under Stalin. The state apparatus was able to take over these instruments of power and to use them for the aggrandizement of a single individual. Its control seemed virtually complete.

Yet in the Soviet Union, for example, religious and ethnic loyalties—and not incidentally, a longing for a more open society—were able to survive, passed on from generation to generation through some seven decades of totalitarian rule. Clearly there was some form of control that escaped the reach of the central authority. This is a matter for the historian and the sociologist to ponder, but I like to think that part of the answer may be that the sources of positive reinforcement are widely dispersed. Sexual partners (see Orwell, 1949), family members, friends, co-workers, even casual acquaintances may reinforce one another's behavior, and at times they may do that more effectively than a central authority. What is important, I think, is that we not allow knowledge of the efficacy of this form of control to be limited to those in power or to the technicians who may work for those in power. The anarchists called for "decentralization," but that word does not go far enough. What is needed is more than that—the widest possible dispersal of power among the greatest possible number of individuals. It may sound self-serving, but I believe that the broadest possible dissemination of Skinner's message is the best means we have of making certain that knowledge of the principles of reinforcement is not restricted to those who might use it for selfish ends.

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