

Does Man Have Options?

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BEYOND FREEDOM AND DIGNITY

By B. F. Skinner

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This stimulating book raises a number of interesting questions and problems for Adventist scholars. Skinner presents a case that seems to be logical but that on close scrutiny is oversimplified. His is a lively presentation of an extreme behavioristic view, a polemic by a psychologist who enjoys writing. But it is not a compilation of data, a fund of psychological knowledge, or a serious threat to the Christian viewpoint.

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To understand Skinner's thesis, the reader must comprehend first what he means by *contingencies of reinforcement*. Skinner's analysis of behavior has three major considerations: (a) the occasion on which the response occurs; (b) the response itself; (c) the reinforcements (rewards) that follow the response. The *interrelationships* of these three considerations are termed "contingencies of reinforcement."

Like a skilled attorney, Skinner makes his case. He argues, cajoles, humors, persuades, attacks, defends, overstates — but never bores — as he attempts to build his case for radical behaviorism. He rejects the notion of "inner man," emphasizes the importance of environmental consequences, suggests that freedom is a matter of contingencies of reinforcement, observes that society is headed toward catastrophe, and suggests that impending societal demise can be prevented by the use of knowledge of reinforcement contingencies to engineer a culture that will not destroy itself. Let us look closely at his major points.

THE DEHOMUNCULIZATION OF MAN. The author contends that it is more profitable to study environmental consequences than to appeal to inner causes for explanations of man's behavior. His objection to talking about "inner man," the "mind," and the "intellect" is that these terms shortcircuit precise explanation of behavior by discouraging inquiry into environmental influences. "Autonomous man," in his words, "is a device used to explain what we cannot explain in any other way. He has been constructed from our ignorance; and as our understanding increases, the very stuff of which he is composed vanishes" (p. 200). "The mental explanation brings curiosity to an end. . . . If we ask someone, 'Why did you go to the theater?' and he says, 'Because I felt like going,' we are apt to take his reply as a kind of explanation" (pp. 12, 13).

THE ENVIRONMENT. Skinner uses analogies from biology, chemistry, and physics as a means of dismantling "inner man." Since the biological sciences made rapid progress when they abandoned the notion of homunculi, ethers, essences, etc., Skinner suggests that "as a science of behavior adopts the strategy of physics and biology, the autonomous agent to which behavior has traditionally been attributed is replaced by the environment" (p. 184); that "the direction of the controlling rela-

tion is reversed: a person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him" (p. 211); that "a scientific analysis of behavior dispossesses autonomous man and turns the control he has been said to exert over to the environment" (p. 205); and that this "analysis leaves less and less for autonomous man to do" (p. 198). Quick to observe, however, that "a mere shift in emphasis from man to environment means very little" (p. 185), Skinner goes on to suggest that what is really needed is a careful analysis of the contingencies of reinforcement — that in addition to shifting our interest to the environment, we must go further and actively analyze, understand, and arrange the various reinforcement contingencies.

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY. If we accept these basic assumptions about the nature of behavioral phenomena, concepts such as *freedom* and *responsibility* are seen as mere illusions. "A scientific analysis shifts the credit as well as the blame to the environment" (p. 21). Skinner maintains that no one is actually free and that a subjective feeling of freedom is not an accurate guide: "Freedom is a matter of contingencies of reinforcement, not of the feelings the contingencies generate" (pp. 37-38). He advocates a carefully analyzed system of control in which the consequences of certain practices are clearly specified. "The fundamental mistake made by all those who choose weak methods of control is to assume that the balance of control is left to the individual, when in fact it is left to other conditions" (p. 99). "To refuse to control is to leave control not to the individual himself, but to other parts of the social and nonsocial environments" (p. 84). Thus in finding concepts such as responsibility, freedom, and dignity more misleading than useful in understanding man's behavior, Skinner holds to his customary position of rejecting mentalistic explanations and of looking to environmental contingencies.

ENGINEERING A CULTURE. Skinner wants to prevent "the catastrophe toward which the world seems to be inexorably moving" (p. 5). "There is nothing to be done about completely unpredictable difficulties," he states, "but we may foresee some trouble by extrapolating current trends. It may be enough simply to observe a steady increase in the number of people on the earth, in the size and location of nuclear stockpiles, or in the pollution of the environment and the depletion of natural resources; we may then change practices to induce people to have fewer children, spend less on nuclear weapons, stop polluting the environment, and consume resources at a lower rate, respectively" (p. 152).

The thrust of this book is that we have the technology and should employ it to reverse many of the factors that contribute to society's suicidal course. "A culture is very much like the experimental space used in the analysis of behavior. Both are sets of contingencies of reinforcement. A child is born into a culture as an organism placed in an experimental space. Designing a culture is like designing an experiment; contingencies are arranged and effects noted" (p. 153). Skinner suggests careful environmental analysis by laboratory principles of behavioristic psychology and subsequent modification of cultural trends so as to prevent ultimate devastation.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

A major criticism of Skinner's system is that he presents it in a deceptively simple way that assumes all his concepts have solid scientific backing and creates the impres-

sion that his is a rigorous scientific theory with broad scope. Such is not the case. In 1957, when Skinner attempted to explain language development similarly, a noted linguist took him to task: "Skinner's claim that all verbal behavior is acquired and maintained in strength through reinforcement is quite empty. . . . The terms borrowed from experimental psychology simply lose their objective meaning with this extension and take over the full vagueness of ordinary language."¹ Skinner's flair for overstatement, and for speculative application of rigorous laboratory terms to situations very different from those in which these terms were derived, is not a new development.

Another psychologist has written: "If all of man's learned behavior could be explained by contingencies of reinforcement, it follows that we should be able to prescribe a means for achieving an optimal culture free of wars, aggression, poverty, and boredom simply by prescribing the appropriate contingencies. Would that life were so simple! . . . As important as it may be to formulate the basic unit of analysis . . . it must also be recognized that this is but a small step on a long road of further experimentation and theory construction. To settle for less would be to resort to the very armchair philosophizing that Skinner has so effectively criticized in others."²

This is not to say that Skinner's theory fails to provide useful directions for further research, but rather that in its present form it has not been validated in the situations for which he prescribes its use. If his model works with pigeons and rats, this is not to say that it will work, or is even the appropriate model, for shaping society. It is important to distinguish clearly between Skinner's *scientific data* (which he discusses very little) and his *speculations* (which compose most of the book). Skinner's data are convincing and very useful for specific situations. But his speculations seem premature; and his implication that we have the behavioral technology to implement these speculations is a serious misrepresentation of the state of the science.

PUNISHMENT THEORY. In the face of growing evidence to the contrary, Skinner maintains that *aversive* (punishing) stimuli effect only temporary changes in behavior, and that these changes are difficult to specify. A number of articles and experimental studies have convincingly demonstrated that aversive stimuli can be quite useful in changing certain behaviors.³ In the case of many behaviors (e.g., smoking), the long-term negative consequences (lung cancer, heart disease) are outweighed by the immediate pleasurable effects. Association of an immediate aversive stimulus with the urge to perform the behavior makes possible a decrease of the intensity of such urges.

On one hand, Skinner maintains that "a person who has been punished is not thereby simply less inclined to behave in a given way; at best, he learns how to avoid punishment" (p. 81). But on the other hand, he views it as the task of the cultural designer "to accelerate the development of practices which bring the remote consequences of behavior into play" (p. 143). It is ironic that he regards some practices as "remote consequences" but is so biased against punishment that he does not view punishment as bringing into play "remote consequences." Thus, what he brings to bear on these issues are emotionally laden analogies, not scientific data. For example, he includes an excerpt from the writings of Joseph Maistre in which a gruesome description of an execution is given (pp. 79-80). This sordid account, offered as an ex-

ample of how persons justify using punishment, concludes with a veiled reference to God as the source of all punishment. To include under the umbrella of punishment anything harmful that one person does to another is a gross distortion and misrepresentation of the possible ethical uses of aversive conditioning. Actually, Skinner's aversive story is used to "condition" his reader against the use of aversive stimuli, to manipulate the unsuspecting reader for the following chapter on "alternatives to punishment."

SHAPING SOCIETY. Skinner's proposal that we solve global problems with a technology that has been useful in training pigeons or rats is intriguing, but his analysis fails to differentiate between *description* and *understanding*. To describe a culture in terms of contingencies of reinforcement doesn't mean that one understands it better for having done so. It is possible to describe all behavior in the entire world in terms of contingencies of reinforcement, but the description is empty if it ignores crucial differences between vastly differing situations. For example, Skinner is fond of comparing Los Vegas gamblers to pigeons in conditioning boxes — merely because both are responding to intermittent (not rewarded at each response) schedules of reinforcement. It seems highly unlikely that the gambler and the pigeon are even remotely similar in their motivation for seeking rewards. This is using laboratory language as a metaphor in a misleading way.

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

ACADEMIC VS. APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY. *Academic*, or *scientific*, psychology has accumulated a large body of factual materials, most of which are ethically neutral. These data are not essentially pro-religious or anti-religious; rather they are a-religious in the best sense of the word.

When these psychological data are utilized to achieve practical goals, it is appropriate to speak of *applied* psychology. An individual psychologist's moral values and ethical standards come into play in this area. Psychological knowledge is not applied in a vacuum, but rather in the context of a value system; but that value system need not come from psychology.

The Christian has a clearly defined model of the universe, a picture of how man ought to function. He accepts the basic assumption that God's revealed truth about how man ought to live is the most accurate portrayal possible. The Christian applies knowledge from the various areas of psychology in the context of a scriptural model of man. Maintaining the distinction between *academic* and *applied* psychology, he finds it is possible to accept Skinner's data without accepting Skinner's model of man. (In this context it is worth noting that most of Skinner's book has to do with his *speculations* about how psychological knowledge ought to be applied. Hence, this book is more a portrayal of Skinner's model of man than it is a presentation of scientific data.) When religion and psychological science clash, the clash is usually not over the validity of data, but rather over the issue of how the data ought to be used — what the implications are for society and for men's relationships with God and with each other.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR BEHAVIOR. The assertion that it is impossible to live without being controlled is thought-provoking. Skinner prefers to study environ-

mental conditions that foster what may be termed responsible or irresponsible behavior, rather than to look at an individual's responsibility for his behavior. If one does not believe in supernatural forces, Skinner's analysis is highly plausible.

The Christian can agree that "the problem is to free man, not from control, but from certain kinds of control, and it can be solved only if our analysis takes all consequences into account" (p. 41). Skinner sees man as having no choice but to serve his environment. Christians view man as having the *option of choosing* either God or Satan as master. In Skinner's analysis, man is able to determine his destiny to some extent by manipulating (mastering) his environment. In the Christian perspective, man, although unable to manipulate God, can choose to trust God as benevolent master.

The Bible (Romans 6) makes clear that man is not free in the sense of being outside the constraints of universal laws, but is either under the control of Satan or under the control of God. Ellen White amplifies this: "Satan takes the control of every mind that is not decidedly under the control of the Spirit of God."⁴ The Christian can agree with Skinner on the major point that man cannot escape control. However, the Christian believes that behavioristic description of the world is not sufficient, in that it does not take into account the active, energizing agency of the Holy Spirit.

When man makes the choice — asks God to come into his life — the power to overcome past conditioning (to overcome sin) is a gift of God. The "new birth" experience is not a mere reordering of priorities or a redirecting of similar basic processes, but is an actual transformation that enables the Christian to become free from the conditioning effects of past behaviors. True, past patterns of behavior will not simply vanish, but through the power of the Holy Spirit the Christian may overcome whatever enslavements to sin he may have set up for himself. When Christ forgives man's sins, it is not a simple covering up of past mistakes, but in the truest sense an energizing, dynamic birth experience in which the Holy Spirit enables man to function to a maximum potential — in the words of John: "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God."

Likewise in the evolution of society, the Christian believes that God actively intervenes in order that his overall plan will be successful. Although it is difficult to specify on which occasion God has actively intervened (aside from where the Bible and Ellen White clearly state this to be the case), the Adventist view of history is one in which God does actively intervene. Thus, Skinner's analysis is again incomplete, for his view is that history is merely a series of accidental rewards or punishments that have shaped certain societal trends.

SUMMARY

Skinner's book may be more misleading than helpful to the average reader in terms of its portrayal of psychology, since it is not a compilation of psychological knowledge but a vigorous statement of philosophy by a contemporary behaviorist. However, the book can serve a useful function if it stimulates Christian scholars to examine their own assumptions and make a clearly articulated and convincing case for the Christian position. Adventist thinkers need to formulate a viable model of man, a defensible Christian perspective of history, and a consistent philosophical stance on societal issues.

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