On Skinner's Politics

Walden II. By B. F. Skinner. (New York: Macmillan, 1948.) pp. 306.

Beyond Freedom and Dignity. By B. F. Skinner. (New York: Bantam Books, 1971.) pp. 225.

Skinner's approach to psychology was inevitable. After Nietzche declared in the nineteenth century that we should move "beyond good and evil," it was only a matter of time before we were asked to go "beyond freedom and dignity." Nietzche prepared the way for Skinner by radicalizing the critique begun by others of the traditional view that man is a reasoning being.[1] Skinner follows that critique through to its logical conclusions. He argues very simply that the new science of behavior has proved that man must be completely redefined. This redefinition makes possible a new approach to politics, an approach which offers the promise of an end to the troubles which have plagued man for thousands of years. Behaviorism, therefore, offers us new hope, but it also asks for a sacrifice in the name of that hope. The question for us is twofold: is the hope justified, and can we make the sacrifice? We should not cling to traditional views of man just because they are familiar to us and hence comforting, but neither should we abandon our tradition without a careful examination of the alternative which behaviorism offers. This study of Skinner is designed to make a contribution to such an examination.

As a result of the controversy surrounding Skinner, both *Walden II* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* are well known: the first is a novel about an imaginary community founded on behavioristic principles; the second is an account of what Skinner believes to be the need for a "technology of behavior."[2] Taken together, they con-

1. Harvey Mansfield, Jr., "Machiavelli's Political Science," *American Political Science Review 75* (1981), p. *293.*

2. The following abbreviations are used in the text: *W (Walden II)* BFD *(Beyond Freedom and Dignity);* B (B. F. Skinner, *About Behaviorism* [New York: Vintage Books, *1974]);* VB (B. F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior* [New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957]); SHB (B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* [New York: Macmillan, *1953]).*

stitute: 1) a powerful attack on traditional philosophy and religion; 2) a program for a new form of politics; and 3) an attempt to establish a scientific basis for what we have come to call "value judgments." These three topics will provide a framework for this study, and will allow us to consider the implications of Skinner's critique of freedom and dignity, the new principle of politics which makes necessary not only a rejection of democracy, but a rejection of natural rights, and, finally, the attempt by Skinner to establish behaviorism as a science of values which can serve as a comprehensive guide for his new politics.

The Rejection of the Tradition

Traditional philosophy should be rejected, according to Skinner, because it has failed to help us solve "the terrifying problems that face us in the world today" (BFD, 1). In other words, it has not shown us how to control behavior effectively. Greek philosophy must have had some "fatal flaw" (BFD, 4; B, 36): it did not advance with the times in the way that physics and biology did. Skinner says that one cannot claim in defense of traditional philosophy that human behavior is an especially difficult field. Modern physics and biology now deal with matters which are, in his opinion, no less difficult than many aspects of human behavior, and they have made tremendous advancements. For example, he denies that putting a man on the moon is less difficult than improving education in our public schools, and he challenges us to consider why we have achieved one and not the other. Greek philosophy failed not because human behavior is too complex for scientific analysis, but because it was founded on the belief in what he calls "mentalistic explanations" (BFD, 14; B, 11). It was deluded by a false notion of cause, and this delusion was presented so forcefully that man has not yet been able to extricate himself from it. Until we abandon the view that something non-physical (such as the "mind" or the "soul") can be the cause of something physical (that is, behavior), we will never devote enough of our time, resources, and energy to the real cause of human behavior: the environment. We can only develop a true science of behavior if we transcend the delusions of the philosophers.

Because Skinner is attempting to fight what he would consider to be delusions, much of his work, including *Walden II* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* is rhetorical. This may account for the view of Greek philosophy which he presents. He has clearly made no at-

tempt to understand it as a scientist should; while he believes that it is crucial for us to understand fine distinctions among different types of behaviorism, he does not think there is any difficulty with generalizing about what the "Greeks" thought. Any reasonably competent scientist would refuse to combine a number of contradictory phenomena under one simple heading, and yet Skinner discusses Zeno, Plato, Aristotle, and common Greek superstition as if they were all one thing. Since Skinner is not the kind of scientist to tolerate such imprecision under normal circumstances, we have to assume that he is making an exception for the sake of rhetoric. But this has one important consequence: there is no serious presentation in these two works of the tradition which Skinner rejects. One has only to consider the character of Castle in *Walden II* to recognize this. He is only a caricature of a human being, not a real person, and he is certainly not a representative of traditional philosophy *(cf. W,* 309). Indeed, he is almost comical, yet he is the only visitor to Walden II whom Skinner allows to be really critical of behaviorism. The absence of a serious treatment of traditional philosophy is also evident in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* where Aristotle's view that there is "something divine in thought" (BFD, 8) is given no more credence than the superstitious belief that "men are possessed by demons" (BFD, 5). This makes it very easy to dismiss Aristotle, but it does not tell us what Aristotle thought. Among other things, it does not address the issue of the extent to which Aristotle intentionally used the common speech of average Athenian citizens to express his ideas, in spite of what he knew to be the imprecisions of common speech. His use of the word "divine" is not the same as that of the average Athenian citizen, and Skinner would have an obligation to admit this if his intention were to have us see his argument as more than simply rhetorical. Skinner implores his readers to excuse his own use of common speech, arguing that the issues he discusses are "important to the nonspecialist and need to be discussed in a nontechnical fashion" (BFD, 21; B, 271-72). If he were attempting to give us a serious analysis of Aristotle, we assume that he would admit that Aristotle deserves at least the same consideration which he asks for himself.

Skinner's superficial treatment of the tradition is even more noticeable in the case of religion. Even though Skinner's behaviorism implies a rejection of all forms of religion, neither *Walden II* nor *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* contains an an involved critique of it. In *Walden II,* for example, Frazier indicates

that the religious practices which the members of the community brought with them have fallen away little by little, like drinking and smoking. "Religious faith becomes irrelevant when the fears which nourish it are allayed and the hopes fulfilled-here on earth" (W, 199). Skinner's treatment of religion is similar to his treatment of philosophy in that neither gives evidence of scientific rigor. To do so would obviously require going beyond the mere dismissal of generic "religion." For instance, one would have to distinguish among religions, paying particular attention to those that do not emphasize rewards in an afterlife. And this would involve an attempt to explain the differences in the motives of those who believe happiness is to be found in this life from those who think of life in this world as a preparation for life in the next. Moreover, any scientific critique of religion would necessarily involve an analysis of revelation. But none of these issues are addressed. In *Walden II,* Skinner does borrow some of the practices of organized "religion," but only because they serve a social function (W, 199). Skinner does not think it necessary to look into the proofs which have been offered of the existence of God in order to show that they are inadequate. He merely presents his readers with a community which he asserts does not need God *(cf.* W, 240, 261, 295). Similarly, in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* he states with assurance that there is no heaven or hell (BFD, 109, 129), and he describes the Ten Commandments as rules which suggest "supernatural sanctions" in order to increase their authority, but which in reality have no such sanctions.

Skinner could not have written this rather cavalier dismissal of "religion" as a serious critique. We have to account for its lack of seriousness by understanding it as a rhetorical treatment intended for popular audiences. If we want to approach Skinner in a truly scientific manner, we cannot be satisfied with his popular dismissal of traditional philosophy and religion. The same scientific rigor which Skinner advocates for his own work should be applied to a study of traditional philosophy and religion before they are abandoned. We have an obligation as scientists to supply for ourselves the serious critique which Skinner does not provide. This article can do no more than suggest some directions one might take.

There are two beliefs which Skinner claims are fundamental to this tradition in his simplified account of it: that man has freedom and that man has dignity. These concepts comprise what he calls the "particularly troublesome" features of "autonomous man" (BFD, 17). In order for behaviorism to have any real impact on the world,

we need first of all to abandon the belief that we are free. Frazier states the importance of this in *Walden II:* "if man is free, then a technology of behavior is impossible" (W, 256). This does not mean that we should give up our freedom so that we can be controlled by a new technology. Skinner asserts that we have never been free; rather, we have always been controlled by the environment but have refused to admit it. This has happened, in his opinion, through the process of operant conditioning. Briefly, this means that we react to the environment instead of acting upon it. Skinner is anxious to distinguish his view of behaviorism from others. He says that we do not respond to the environment with either a reflex action or a stimulus-response action. We are *reinforced* by the environment in both positive and negative ways. One example that he uses to explain this is that of a person who escapes from the hot sun when he moves to cover (BFD, 25). The lower temperature discovered there reinforces the behavior; that is, it makes it more likely or increases the probability that the behavior will take place again. It does not follow in Skinner's scheme as it would with a crude behaviorism that the man will necessarily move for cover the next time the sun comes out, but the reinforcement will probably have an effect on the behavior in the long run. The crucial thing to understand about this example is that Skinner is asserting that the man does not move for cover in order to become cool or for the purpose of becoming cool. He does not "learn" that it is a good idea to look for cover if it gets too hot. The behavior of the organism simply changes as a result of its response to the environment.

The second belief, that man has dignity, is also challenged by this view of behavior. Because the man who moves for cover has not taken any action on his own, because he has not acted, Skinner says that we have difficulty praising him. "Any evidence that a person's behavior may be attributed to external circumstances seems to threaten his dignity *or* worth" (BFD, 41). We are used to receiving credit for the things that we do, and behaviorism threatens to take this credit away from us: "there is no point in commending a person for doing what he is going to do anyway" (BFD, 47). Skinner would argue that our conditioning has made it important for us to receive credit and praise for things we accomplish. Art, music, literature, and even love are considered commendable, however, only if they can be thought of as accomplishments, and Skinner's science calls this into question (BFD, 43). We have never had freedom or dignity, according to Skinner, but we are afraid to give up our belief in

them. In addition to this, entire "literatures" of freedom and dignity have been produced which he says make it even more difficult for us to abandon these old beliefs (BFD, 27-39; 50-55) . But Skinner argues that the old way has failed. We need to give up these beliefs no matter how painful it is, or the problems we are facing in the world will destroy us.

While Skinner gives his readers the impression that traditional philosophy had a naive faith in man's autonomy, both Plato and Aristotle would actually concede a great deal to his psychology. Their concentration on political life itself is a tribute to their appreciation of the importance of "environment." In the *Republic,* for example, Socrates argues that each type of regime has a corresponding character type.' Democratic regimes produce democratic souls, aristocratic regimes produce aristocratic souls, and so on. Most men do not choose what they think or feel is noble or base, good or bad, just or unjust; they take their bearings from the standards dominant in the community. In other words, the vast majority of men are not free. This point is made forcefully by Socrates in his allegory of the cave, where men are portrayed as chained by their opinions to the floor of a dark cave, living every day looking at the shadows of artificial truths. [4] This slavery to opinion is absolutely complete for most men. They will never be able to climb out of the cave into the light of truth, or even gain an appreciation of the fact that they are in the darkness. Like Skinner, Socrates would not be impressed by the fact that those in chains might "feel" free (BFD, 29-38). The "environment" is the determining factor in their lives, and they are condemned to their conditioning whether or not they realize it. In the *Ethics,* Aristotle argues that most men are formed by their political community. He says that some think we are made good by nature, others think that we are made good by habituation, and others think that teaching makes us good.' In his opinion, there are so few who have either good natures or are open to argument that it is best to concentrate on habituation in ethical training. In the Greek language this is emphasized by the fact that the word "ethics" means "habit." For him as well as for Plato the effect of the political community is all-pervasive. He argues, for example, that ethics in-

3. Plato, *Republic,* trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 544e.

4. Plato, *Republic,* 514a.

5. Aristotle, *Ethics,* trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 1179.

stilled by parents will not survive in their children if they are at variance with the laws or customs of the political community. This is one of the reasons that Aristotle gives for the relationship which must exist between ethics and politics.° Neither Plato nor Aristotle would argue in a simple-minded way that man is free; however, neither would they think it possible to deny that some are capable of freedom and dignity. To do this would be to deny the possibility of philosophy and hence the significance of all questions relating to freedom and dignity.

But Skinner contends that freedom and dignity have never existed. He bases this on what can really be reduced to a single proposition: that which philosophers have called "mind" does not exist. The concessions which Plato and Aristotle would make to Skinner's psychology would not be seen as concessions by him. The control which they would admit is exerted over men by the "environment" is control over men's minds, and enslaved minds always have the potential for becoming free. However, Skinner asserts that there is nothing about man which transcends the purely physical. "The picture which emerges from a scientific analysis is not of a body with a person inside, but of a body which is a person..." (BFD, 190; W, 127). Man is a "repertoire of behavior." Discovering the complex relationship of man to his environment has been difficult, and until now we have, according to Skinner, allowed ourselves to believe that our minds can actually be a cause of behavior. Skinner asserts that this is a mistake: "the appeal to mind explains nothing at all" (BFD, 186).

He supports this position by arguing that man is not distinguished from other animals by his capacity for speech or understanding. We do not "have" or "possess" a capacity for speech; we exhibit what Skinner calls "verbal behavior" (BFD, 117).' That is, we come to make certain sounds which are reinforced by their effects on ourselves and others (VB, 1; cf. B, 99). We can get ourselves a glass of water when we are thirsty, but we can also ask for a glass of water if we have found that people tend to bring us water when they hear the sounds we make in asking the question. How we speak is

6. Allan Bloom, "The Democratization of the University," *How Democratic is America?,* ed. Robert Goldwin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), pp. 109-136.

7. The most well-known critique of Skinner's view of language is: Noam Chomsky, rev. of *Verbal Behavior, Language* 35 (1959), p. 26. See also: William Stokes, rev. of *About Behaviorism, Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 6 (1977), p. 79.

therefore a product of our environment, in this case the "verbal community." We do not, in Skinner's opinion, convey "meaning" when we behave verbally. The word "meaning" implies that we intend something when we speak and that something is understood by the mind of the person to whom we speak *(cf.* BFD, 103). Speech does not "mean" anything; it is one manifestation of behavior, which is nothing more than a reflection of the contingencies of reinforcement to which we have been exposed. It can have an effect on behavior because it is one form of behavior; we respond to and act upon speech but not because it has meaning which is understood by us. Skinner must deny that speech has meaning because, as we have seen, he denies the existence of the mind and of all "mentalistic explanations." If we do not have minds, it follows that we do not think. Skinner's behaviorism culminates in a denial of the possibility of thought itself. He does recognize that certain phenomena take place "inside the skin," but thinking is not for him a mental activity which involves any independence from the environment (BFD, 186).[8] He says that "so far as a science of behavior is concerned, Man Thinking is simply Man Behaving" (VB, 452; B, 113). If this were true, then Skinner would be right and there would be no freedom or dignity for man.

This position, however, is impossible to maintain. In order for it to be true, one would have to deal satisfactorily with the problems posed when this approach to speech and understanding is applied to itself. Skinner is not insensitive to this difficulty, which his critics have often noted.° He says that "it would be absurd for the behaviorist to contend that he is in any way exempt from his analysis. He cannot step out of the causal stream and observe behavior from some special point of vantage" (B, 258; VB, 453). What, then, is his purpose in writing about behaviorism? Does he not want to convince his readers to change their minds about issues fundamental to life, to replace opinions with truth? Skinner argues that this is not the case. Since we do not have minds, they cannot be changed.[10] "Beliefs, preferences, perceptions, needs, purposes, and

8. See B. F. Skinner, "Answers for My Critics," *Beyond the Punitive Society,* ed. Harvey Wheeler (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1973), pp. 256-266.

9. Arnold Toynbee, "Great Expectations," *Beyond the Punitive Society,* " p. 113; Max Black, "Some Aversive Responses to a Would-be Reinforcer," *Beyond the Punitive Society,* p. 125.

10. Harvey Wheeler, "Introduction: A Nonpunitive World?" *Beyond the Punitive Society,* p. 1.

opinions are other possessions of autonomous man which are said to change when we change minds. What is changed in each case is a probability of action" (BFD, 88). Skinner's writing is one form that his behavior takes, and it may or may not have an effect on our behavior, depending on our response to it. But this explanation leaves much unresolved. In order to be consistent, Skinner would have to argue that it was not thought that led him to design his experiments on behavior in the first place; that he could not have used his mind to analyze the results of his experiments; and that conclusions could not have been drawn from his analysis, because logic itself is a mental activity. Furthermore, he would have to admit that his arguments are not true. He writes:

> The truth of a statement of fact is limited by the sources of the behavior of the speaker, the control exerted by the current setting, the effects of similar settings in the past, the effects upon the listener leading to precision or to exaggeration or falsification, and so on. There is no way in which a verbal description can be absolutely true. A scientific law is derived from possibly many episodes of this sort, but it is similarly limited by the repertoires of the scientists involved. The verbal community of the scientist maintains special sanctions in an effort to guarantee validity and objectivity, but again, there can be no absolute. No deduction from a law can therefore be absolutely true. Absolute truth can be found, if at all, in rules derived from rules, and here it is mere tautology. (B, 150; *cf.* 143, 148; *cf.* SHB, 132-134)

Every attempt to state a fact as true must therefore fail, because every statement is *decisively* limited by a number of factors. It is hardly sufficient to say, as Skinner does, that these factors make absolute truth impossible. By only admitting that absolute truth is impossible, Skinner gives one the false impression that the scientist can still achieve a high degree of certainty or "relative truth" in his work. But how much truth could be left in a statement, even assuming that the impact of these factors could be measured? If the individual scientist is not capable of thought, then he must always remain a part of his subject matter, limited by everything and everyone around him. Objectivity and hence truth of any kind is impossible.

It follows from this that the community of scientists can be of no assistance. Their "special sanctions" are only a collection of meaningless responses to the environment. Insofar as scientists are bound by these sanctions, they are not behaving in a simply private manner; that is, factors beyond the private life of the scientist determine how he works. For example, Skinner explains that "the published

results of scientists are subject to rapid check by others, and the scientist who allows himself to be swayed by consequences that are not part of his subject matter is likely to find himself in difficulties" (BFD, 166). However, he is misleading us when he tries to argue that this improves the "validity" or "objectivity" of the scientist's work. Instead of reacting to his environment with individual idiosyncrasies, the scientist reacts to his environment in a way that has been at least partly determined by idiosyncrasies held in common with other scientists. We may allow that this distinguishes the scientist *in* some way, but it does not move him any closer to the truth, absolute or relative. Skinner does no more than replace personal subjectivity with group subjectivity.

Science depends for its existence on reason as an activity of the mind, and Skinner denies that reason of this kind exists. Only reason makes it possible for scientists to study the world rather than merely to behave as part of the world. And if scientists cannot achieve objectivity through the use of their reason, then behaviorism can make no claim to the truth. It is difficult, therefore, to see how he can argue that the tradition is based on falsehood. Skinner's rejection of the tradition is made in the name of a science which cannot defend itself.

The Politics of the Future

In spite of the problems which Skinner has in establishing the foundations of his science, he is optimistic about what it can accomplish. Clearly, it is a science which can only "accomplish": behaviorism cannot by definition be a "theoretical" science. It is practical if it is anything. *Walden II* illustrates this by presenting an outline of the basic relationship which Skinner sees between behaviorism and politics. It is not intended to be an actual plan for a political community, but rather an argument that politics can be founded on behavioristic principles.[11] It is less important, therefore, to understand the specifics of the particular community described by Skinner than it is to grasp the fundamental ways in which politics would have to be transformed in order to conform with behaviorism.

It would be necessary to begin by rejecting democracy. Skinner's

11. B. F. Skinner, "Comment on Watt's B. F. Skinner and the Technological Control of Social Behavior," *American Political Science Review 69 (1975),* p. 228.

Frazier does this in three different ways. First of all, he criticizes current political practices in the United States. He says in an argument with Castle that if democracy can be defined as government by the people or according to the will of the people, then "democracy is a pious fraud" (W, 265). He says that it is absurd to think elections are meaningful either to the individual or to the state. The chances that anyone's vote will have any real impact on an election would have to be described as negligible, if voters could even be said to go to the polls for the purpose of having an effect on elections. Rather, Skinner says that they go to the polls to avoid being talked about by their neighbors or out of some irrational spite against a candidate they dislike. "A man has no logical reason to vote whatsoever" (W, 265). This is a popular argument today, but it is not a thoughtful argument; a government can exist according to the will of the people without its elections being meaningful for every individual. One could say that because a single vote rarely makes a difference in modern democracy that it is inherently less satisfying for the individual than a classical democracy, but this does not mean that the will of the people is not sovereign. If people never went to the polls for any rational purpose, then Frazier's point would be stronger. He has hardly proved this. Few would argue that the majority of voters are completely rational at the polls, but Frazier would have to extend his argument to show that the voter is devoid of rationality.

In addition to claiming that voting is not meaningful to the individual, Frazier states that it is not important to the state. It never really matters who wins an election. "The platforms of the two parties are carefully made as much alike as possible, and when the election is over we're all advised to accept the result like good sports" (W, 266). He does not consider the possibility that the similarity of the major parties is an indication that the majority of citizens in the United States are moderate. The fact that there are only occasional moments in history when significant differences exist between major parties may be a sign of the health and stability of the electorate. If the majority of the American people are moderate most of the time, then the similarity of the parties could suggest what Skinner's Frazier denies: the people really are sovereign. Frazier's points could have a kind of superficial appeal for some critics of the regime, but the points he has made do not stand up to scrutiny.

However, his rejection of democracy has little to do with the specifics of the American regime. The second way that Frazier rejects democracy is to criticize the judgment of the democratic ma-

jority. He argues that democracy always seems to mean that the people choose some men to rule for them, not that they actually rule themselves. This presents a problem: "Are the people skilled governors? No" (W, 266). They cannot rule and they are incapable of judging those whom they elect to rule over them. "The people are in no position to evaluate experts" (W, 267). It would be difficult to deny that there is some truth to these charges if they were being made by someone else, but Skinner has made it impossible for himself to make these charges and maintain any consistency. He can only make these criticisms by rejecting his own standards of judgment. He cannot mean that there is a natural distinction between the few and the many, between wisdom and virtue on the one hand and ignorance and vice on the other. This would require that he embrace a view of nature which is incompatible with behaviorism. Also, one has to wonder about Skinner's assertion through Frazier that experts should rule. What is the claim to rule of the "experts" if, according to Skinner, they cannot know anything? What is their claim to expertise? In order to be consistent, Skinner would have to say that any so-called "experts" are simply people who behave differently with respect to governing than other people. Since there is nothing in nature which makes this behavior the preserve of a minority, Skinner should admit that democracy cannot be an inherently defective form of government.

His third argument against democracy is his most complex, and reveals the true connection between his psychology and politics. Skinner's Frazier says that "no principle is consistently used by a democratic government" (W, 264). In other words, the rule of the people is not really rule at all. At first glance, this resembles one of the classical arguments against democracy. For example, Socrates says in the *Republic* that because of its license, democracy contains all species of regimes. It is a kind of "general store of regimes," and the souls of democratic citizens are affected by this variety.[12] The majority rules in a democracy, but the majority is actually composed of a variety of ruling principles. Socrates also praises democracy for being the practical regime which is most tolerant of philosophy; it is therefore both bad and good, depending on the circumstances and on the alternatives available in practice at any given time. Since philosophy is for Skinner an activity of the mind and hence impos-

12. Plato, *Republic, 557d; cf.* Joseph Cropsey, *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), *p.* 1.

sible, he does not feel compelled to praise democracy for being tolerant of philosophy: Skinner's rejection of democracy is absolute. In addition to this, Skinner cannot maintain his argument that no principle is consistently used in democracy. "Principles" are things understood by the mind, not simply a form of behavior. Based on his own position, Skinner cannot reject democracy on the level of principle. However, it is not sufficient to point out these contradictions in Skinner's argument. His position, though called into question by these contradictions, is more complex than is revealed by this level of the argument. It would be unfair to dismiss Skinner here without a closer examination.

The classical principle of rule is replaced in Skinner's work by the behavioral fact of control. When one rules, one rules according to some principle or principles, whether or not one articulates them. This is clear in Aristotle's discussion of the regime in his *Politics.* The different forms of rule and the different claims to rule within a regime are distinguished from one another by their animating principles of justice." For example, both democrats and aristocrats rule according to a certain view of justice: democrats believe that justice is numerical equality, and aristocrats believe that justice is proportional equality or equality according to desert. Aristotle would argue that there is no way either to study these regimes or to evaluate them without reference to their views of justice. In other words, the principle of rule looks beyond itself. Skinner denies this, which means that his discussion of democracy differs completely from the classical one.'" His real complaint against democracy is that it makes control impossible. Frazier says:

> Let's not stop with democracy. It isn't, and can't be, the best form of government, because it's based on a scientifically invalid conception of man. It fails to take account of the fact that in the long run *man is determined by the state. A laissez-faire* philosophy which trusts to the inherent goodness and wisdom of the common man is incompatible with the observed fact that men are made good or bad and wise or foolish by the environment in which they grow. (W, 273, emphasis in original)

Skinner identifies modern democracy with *a laissez-faire*

13. Aristotle, *Politics,* trans. E. Barker (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 1279a-1280; 1301a.

14. Harry Clor, "On the Moral Authority and Value of Law: The Province of Jurisprudence Undetermined," *Minnesota Law Review* 58 (1974), p. 569.

philosophy, by which he means the belief that the state should be limited in its ability to control the individual. Since Skinner does not believe that man is autonomous, he says that any behavior which the state does not control will be left to the control of chance events. If we are formed by our environment, then it follows that democracy cannot be the best form of government, provided that Skinner can establish through his science of behavior that some forms of control are better than others or that control is better than lack of control.

Once the principle of rule is replaced by control, politics takes on a new meaning. It is no longer bound by either the classical view that there are principles of justice inherent in the nature of things to which one must conform, or by the modern view that nature establishes rights which the state must respect. Skinner says:

> Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are basic rights. But they are the rights of the individual and were listed as such at a time when the literatures of freedom and dignity were concerned with the aggrandizement of the individual. They have only minor bearing on the survival of a culture. (BFD, 172)

This is one of the few times where Skinner is not completely honest with his readers. He seems reluctant to emphasize the fact that behaviorism requires not only the rejection of democracy but the rejection of natural rights. He does call life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness "basic rights" in this passage, but he immediately indicates that they are basic only in the context of the literatures of freedom and dignity which he has already discredited. When he says that they have only "minor bearing on the survival of a culture," he must mean that they cannot be basic rights. His reluctance to make this point in an unambiguous way is difficult to understand; discussion of natural rights has almost disappeared among political scientists in favor of talk about "human rights." Even though the contemporary change in terminology seems minor, it is not. The change indicates that there is a widespread uncertainty about the foundation of our rights. If they are not seen as derived from a nature which makes them more than mere human creations or conventions, then what obligation does the state have to respect them?[15] Although he does not emphasize the point, Skinner says what he must in order to clear the path for his new science: the doctrine of natural rights is part of the tradition which must be abandoned. This is the culmina-

15. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1953).

tion of Skinner's political teaching, and it is his most dangerous argument. Without the doctrine of natural rights, the modern state in its liberal form is impossible. The fundamental justification for limiting the powers of the state is that, as the Declaration of Independence and other founding documents indicate, governments are instituted among men for the purpose of protecting pre-existent rights. If these rights do not exist by nature, then no government except tyranny has any purpose. Skinner is attempting to introduce a complete transformation of politics rather than a change in government (W, 193-5).

The new politics is free from all limitations except those related to technology. At the end of *Walden II,* Frazier admits to a fascinated Burris that he sees a "curious similarity" between himself and God (W, 296), the basic difference being his more complete control. As he lies upon a hill above his community, he says: "I look upon my work and, behold, it is good" (W, 295). But Frazier is not satisfied with Walden II. Indeed, it would not be consistent for a politics founded on behaviorism to become satisfied with itself; satisfaction would imply that the natural limits to one's striving had either been reached or that the relationship between one's striving and its natural limits had been understood, but this is impossible if there are no natural limits. Frazier says:

> What remains to be done?... Well, what do you say to the design of personalities? Would that interest you? The control of temperament? Give me the specifications, and I'll give you the man! What do you say to the control of motivation, building the interests which will make men most productive and most successful? Does that seem to you fantastic? Yet some of the techniques are available, and more can be worked out experimentally. Think of the possibilities) (W, 292; *cf.* BFD, 73)

These can be either exciting new possibilities or frightening prospects, depending on how Skinner answers what he refers to as questions of "value." His psychology has to succeed where others have failed; in order to know what kind of man to produce with the available technology, it has to be able to answer the question: what is good? Skepticism about behaviorism's answer to this question leads Castle to the conclusion that Frazier is a Fascist (W, 281). This seems to be a reasonable concern. If a science of behavior can design personalities as well as control temperament and motivation, then would not such a science be dangerous in the hands of some men?

As we have seen, Skinner does attempt to provide an answer to

this concern, but he fails to deal with a less obvious and more pedestrian problem. He openly attacks the foundations of the modern liberal state without considering the actual political ramifications of his attack. He writes for a popular audience, urging them to replace their old politics with his new version, but the practical effects of his polemic could be less interesting than he expects. If we became as a consequence of his writing incapable of believing in our own principles, would it necessarily follow that we would be able to take refuge in a new behavioristic community? Skinner hopes that he will weaken the foundations of the liberal state and offer us an alternative for the future, but he could create conditions under which science itself could lose its appeal. Would we not then be left with something worse even by Skinner's standards than democracy? Castle raises an important issue when he suggests that behaviorism might produce a new form of barbarism, but Skinner does not think to have his character remind us that our world is already capable of barbarism.

The Problem of "Value"

Behaviorism appears at one level to be an ethically neutral tool which could be used for either good or bad (BFD, 143). This is the source of Castle's fear of it and his primary reason for attempting to defend democracy. Skinner contends that this fear is unwarranted; behaviorism could only be understood as a tool if it were possible for some men to be free to use it, but none of us is free. "The relation between the controller and the controlled is reciprocal" (BFD, 161). In other words, there are only more or less conspicuous controllers, not a separate group of those controlled. Skinner illustrates this by describing a scientist who is studying the behavior of a pigeon in a laboratory. "His apparatus exerts a conspicuous control on the pigeon, but we must not overlook the control exerted by the pigeon. The behavior of the pigeon has determined the design of the apparatus and the procedures in which it is used" (BFD, 161). One suspects that this is small consolation for the pigeon, and it does little to answer the questions raised by Castle. Indeed, Skinner does admit that "the misuse of a technology of behavior is a serious matter" (BFD, 174), but he believes that misuse can be guarded against by careful manipulation of the contingencies of reinforcement under which the controllers operate. How can this counter-control be justified by behaviorism? According to Skinner, it would be impos-

sible for the controllers to be unjust; there are no objective principles of right from which one can derive an idea of justice *(cf.* B, 268). Neither can counter-control be justified in order to protect natural rights, as we have seen. Why does Skinner say that "the principle of making the controller a member of the group he controls should apply to the designer of a culture¨ (BFD, 164)? On what grounds or according to what standard does Skinner recommend a "balancing" of power? He claims that behaviorism can provide the standard; although it emerges as an ethically neutral tool, when applied to politics it is not value-free (BFD, *174; cf.* 97-99).

Behaviorism is, according to Skinner, more than a science which exists in the realm of values: it is the "science of values" (BFD, 99). This is not as surprising a claim as it seems, considering that he has already denied the existence of the mind. If values are actually manifestations of the body, then it makes sense that science should develop ways of dealing with them. Skinner defines a "value judgment" as "a matter not of fact but of how someone feels about a fact" (BFD, 99). Implicit in this definition is the rejection of the idea of the mind. Minds form opinions, whereas bodies feel the world around them. Having an opinion means achieving a partial grasp of some truth through the use of reason, but making a "value judgment" is merely feeling something in response to a fact. [16] Skinner says that when we distinguish between a fact and how we feel about it, "we are simply distinguishing between a thing and its reinforcing effect" (BFD, 99) . Since behaviorism is the science of reinforcement, it seems that it must also be the science of values; he therefore argues that the "ought" should not be beyond its scope. However, this conclusion does not follow from Skinner's own arguments. The moment he says that values are a matter of feeling, he has to admit that behaviorism cannot be a science of values. He must make this admission because of his conflicting belief that there is what amounts to a gap between the reinforcing effect which a fact has and the feeling which we have:

> There is no important causal connection between the reinforcing effect of a stimulus and the feelings to which it gives rise. We might be tempted to say, following William James' reinterpretation of emotion, that a stimulus is not reinforcing because it feels good but feels good because it is reinforcing. But the

16. Martin Diamond, "The Dependence of Fact Upon Value," *Interpretation 2* (1972), p. 226.

> 'because's' are again misleading. Stimuli are reinforcing *and* produce conditions *which* are felt as good.... (BFD, 101-2; *cf.* B, 213, emphasis added)

All Skinner can claim for behaviorism based on this argument is that behaviorism is the science of the reinforcing effect of a stimulus. If there is no important causal connection between this effect and the feeling which Skinner associates with value judgments, then there is a gap between behaviorism and values. Skinner would have to prove that the reinforcing effect produces a corresponding feeling if he is to claim that the feeling can be studied scientifically.

But he continues to discuss values as if they can be understood by his science. He says that "to make a value judgment by calling something good or bad is to classify it in terms of its reinforcing effects" (BFD, 99). One cannot define "good" or "bad" as such on the basis of behaviorism, because that would suggest that there is an essence or "idea of goodness" to which all things are related. "Good things are positive reinforcers" (BFD, 98). We call things good if they reinforce us positively; that is, if we are likely to act again in ways which tend to produce the same reinforcement. We call things bad if they reinforce us negatively.[17] Susceptibility to reinforcement is "presumably because of the contingencies of survival under which the species evolved" (BFD, 99, 123, 128, 130). The word "presumably" in this passage deserves more attention than Skinner gives it. If his whole science of values rests on the assumption that things are reinforcing because of their relationship to survival, and if that relationship is often difficult or impossible to determine with certainty, then his science is again open to question. Skinner has been criticized on this point. For example, heroin is positively reinforcing but very deadly.[18] His answer to this challenge is less than satisfactory: "the effect of a reinforcer which cannot be attributed to its survival value in the course of evolution (the effect of heroin, for example) is presumably anomalous" (BFD, 104). In other words, he dismisses evidence which contradicts his assumptions; hence, he is forced to use the word "presumably" again. Even assuming that

17. This idea has caused some excitement among professors of philosophy. See: Max Hocutt, "Skinner on the Word `Good': A Naturalistic Semantics for Ethics," *Ethics 87* (1977), p. 319. See also: Lawrence Hinman, "How Not to Naturalize Ethics: The Untenability of a Skinnerian Naturalistic Ethic," *Ethics* 89 (1979), p. 292.

18. Peter Stillman, "The Limits of Behaviorism: A Review Essay on B. F. Skinner's Social and Political Thought," *American Political Science Review* 69 (1975), p. 202.

everything could be related to survival in some way, one would still not have proved that all things are reinforcing because they help or hinder survival. Using Skinner's own scientific caution, one would have to say that science can only show that things are reinforcing *and* either help or hinder survival, not that things are reinforcing *because* they help or hinder survival. Skinner succumbs to the very logical fallacy which he claims is characteristic of Plato and Aristotle: *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (BFD, 101; B, 10).

Survival fails to provide a foundation for determining what things are good and bad. When Skinner poses the question of why a person should be concerned with the survival of his "culture," he says that "the only honest answer to that kind of question seems to be this: `There is no good reason why you should be concerned, but if your culture has not convinced you that there is, so much the worse for your culture' " (BFD, 131). A science based on concern for survival is therefore the product of its "culture." Skinner openly admits that the critics of behaviorism are "right in insisting that we are all culture-bound and that we approach the study of behavior with preconceptions" (B, 20). But to be bound by one's "culture" is to be bound by practices which reflect a particular historical development. This presents a serious difficulty for Skinner because he says that history is unknowable. He has Frazier assert that even a "single historical event is too complex to be adequately *known* by anyone. It transcends all the intellectual capacities of men" (W, 238). Frazier emphasizes the point that nothing except a sense of destiny confuses our evaluation of the present more than a sense of history: "It obfuscates every attempt to get a clear appreciation of the present" (W, 239). Behaviorism is in the uncomfortable position of attempting to deal with the present while being under the yoke of the past. On the one hand, "The present is the thing. It's the only thing we can deal with, anyway, in a scientific way" (W, 239); on the other hand, Skinner says that "a complete break with the past is impossible" (BFD, 156). Science ids, in the final analysis, ruled by history.

Skinner undermines his entire project by divesting science of its own authority. His inability to prove that survival is good means that he cannot establish the goodness of science itself. Why should one choose science over, let us say, superstition or magic (B, 178)? The decision in favor of science depends upon a standard of good which he cannot provide. This is revealed in a passage in which Skinner compares the prescientific view of man with the scientific view:

> In what we may call the prescientific view (and the word is not necessarily pejorative) a person's behavior is at least to some extent his own achievement. He is free to deliberate, decide, and act, possibly in original ways, and he is to be given credit for his successes and blamed for his failures. In the scientific view (and the word is not necessarily honorific) a person's behavior is determined by a genetic endowment traceable to the evolutionary history of the species and by the environmental circumstances to which as an individual he has been exposed. Neither view can be proved, but it is in the nature of scientific inquiry that the evidence should shift in favor of the second. (BFD, 96)

If Skinner cannot even assure us that we can use the term "prescientific" in the pejorative sense, how can he expect us to make the sacrifices necessary in order to embrace the "scientific" view? How can he ask us to give up freedom, dignity, and our natural rights in the name of a science which he concedes is itself a product of the society it is to transform? If science cannot prove to *us* that it is better than non-science, why should we accept it as our standard for private and public action?

Behaviorism leads Skinner to the conclusion that man must be redefined; the view that *we* are reasoning beings must be replaced by the view that we are behaving animals. He refers to C. S. Lewis' warning that man is being abolished and then adds: "his abolition has long been overdue. . .To man *qua* man we readily say good riddance" (BFD, 191).[19] He argues that by clinging to the traditional view *of* man as a being capable *of* freedom and dignity, *we* have not turned to a study of what he considers to be the real cause of behavior; consequently, we have not begun to solve the problems which we face. But the behaviorism he presents is itself a problem. It cannot claim that it has discovered the truth, because it denies that we have the faculties which would make such a discovery possible, and even if it had discovered the truth, it could not prove that the truth is good. Skinner's science cannot justify its own existence. In the name of that science he attacks traditional philosophy and religion and makes ambitious proposals for a complete transformation of politics, but he leaves us with a meaningless universe. Ultimately, he cannot prove that science is better than non-science, which seems to leave us with the grim prospect of making an arbitrary choice between the two. However, Skinner cannot even

19. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

assure us that choice is better than non-choice.[20] We are left with nothingness. Skinner's behaviorism is a veiled form of nihilism.

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20. Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. xiii.