FACT AND VALUE IN SKINNER

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I

> To confuse and delay the improvement of cultural practices by quibbling about the word *improve* is itself not a useful practice. Let us agree, to start with, that health is better than illness, wisdom better than ignorance, love better than hate, and productive energy better than neurotic sloth.[1]

I think it *is* useful to quibble about the word "improve." of course, we all seek a better life and a cultural milieu that increases happiness. No quibble here. Yet when B. F. Skinner writes of methods conducive to these ends, we become cautious and uncomfortable. I intend to show the source of our discomfort. As it turns out, Skinner's map for a better culture reveals some tortuous curves, few comfort stations, and a totalitarian destination. Our suspicions crystallize when we see Skinner's basic problem. He confuses "fact" and "value," and this confusion puts his view of science out to sea.

Walden Two (1948) represents Skinner's vision of a planned culture. His novel rests upon principles spelled out in *Science and Human Behavior* (1953), interpreted culturally in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971), and later defended in *About Behaviorism* (1974).[2] A behavioral technology is available, we are told, and should be used to understand the nature of cultural control and to design the controlling factors for optimum cultural survival. Applying a science of human behavior to cultural conditions faces one major problem. Democracy has created the conditions for such a science, yet democracy is in conflict with applications of the methods of science. Throughout his writings, Skinner attempts to resolve this conflict. I believe he fails, since "value" escapes all attempts to be packed into his framework of science. Round pegs don't go into square holes.

II

Skinner presents a straightforward appeal. Social environments should be designed to overcome the shortcomings of previous cultures. Since, as he says, "All men control and are controlled,"[3] then unless people turn to the business of scientifically controlling culture, either control will be relinquished to others who are far less skilled, or events will be "accidentally" controlled. In terms of cultural survival, it is best to understand and manipulate the environment for the benefit of the entire culture. A behavioral technology should remain consistently experimental, yet proceed on the well-established assumption that behavior is the result of lawful relations between people and the contingencies of the controlling

environment. This will ultimately lead to a positive state of affairs: "Let men be happy, informed, skillful, well behaved and productive."[4]

For Skinner, having the available techniques *and* knowing what changes to make are *both* within the province of science. Non-scientists have no special knowledge that enables them to make effective "value judgments." Designing a culture is much like designing an experiment. Designs are like tentative hypotheses or guesses–they are not, he says, "value judgments." Skinner believes that his scientific conception of man and nature is unassailable. And, as science progresses and its methods are further applied, he believes that his scientific view of human nature will become more obvious and inescapable. Unfortunately, the scientific conception of human nature conflicts with the traditional or democratic concept of human nature: "But science insists that action is initiated by forces impinging upon the individual, and that caprice is only another name for behavior for which we have not yet found a cause."[5] Hence, the democratic philosophy of human nature is itself the result of contingencies of reinforcement on the political and governmental scene. Democracy arose because of a particular set of historical circumstances which made it effective. It brought the common man a sense of dignity and power. It enabled him to overcome tyranny. It is time now, however, to realize that no matter how effective current democratic practices are, there are changes that can and should be made for the survival of culture. Control always operates; persuasion, arguments, appeals to reason or understanding, and education are kinds of control. Arranging an opportunity for action is simply disguised control, whereas threats are obvious attempts to control: "If we are not to rely solely upon accident for the innovations which give rise to cultural evolution, we must accept the fact that some kind of control of human behavior is inevitable."[6] We do not question, then, *whether* we are controlled, but rather who will be in charge of the control–accident, tyrants, or ourselves.

Skinner insists that we must accept a scientific view of human nature (his), because to reject his view of human nature is also to reject the methods of science. For Skinner, each entails the other. The experimental method is successful; advances in technology have marked out a better life for people, and credit should be given to the methods of science instead of the people themselves. To turn to the "moral faculty" within people or to "autonomous man" for explanations ushers in a fiction that obscures the facts which a science of behavior has to offer for betterment of mankind.

It may be tempting to believe that democratic principles are maintained because they somehow reflect human nature, but it does no good to say that people follow democratic principles because they want to. The

process of "wanting to" is itself the result of certain "cultural engineering" conditions: "If we neglect the conditions which produce democratic *behavior*, it is useless to try to maintain a democratic *form* of government."[7] The growth of scientific knowledge is *not* at odds with democratic practices; rather, Skinner declares, it is a *part of* the conditions which enable democratic practices to continue. By turning our attention to the external or environmental conditions which have shaped men and governments, we are taking a step with important consequences. Now, this account seems almost feasible. I say "almost" because we have yet to see how "value" fits into his scheme.

III

Skinner repeatedly claims that "values" ("ethics") are paradigm examples of the controlling factors among people in groups. Admiration, approval, affection, and other reinforcements are bestowed upon an individual when he behaves as he *ought*. Blame, censure, and criticism come to an individual who behaves in a manner unacceptable to his social environment. A person is "good" or "bad," then, according to the standards of conduct arranged by the community: "This practice is so thoroughly ingrained in our culture that we often fail to see that it is a technique of control."[8] Values or judgments, then, are not out of the range of Skinner's science of behavior–they are important subjects *of* his science of behavior. To him, science explicates values:

> How people feel about facts, or what it means to feel anything, is a question for which a science of behavior should have an answer. A fact is no doubt different from what a person feels about it, but the latter is a fact also.[9]

The word "good" is simply another name for "positive reinforcer." Actions or behaviors are not admirable or blameworthy in themselves, since calling something "admirable" or "blameworthy" is simply to point to its effects–its reinforcing effects. The difference between a "fact" and a "value," then, is that a fact is a thing and a value is the reinforcing effect of that thing. Knowledge of the thing and how one "feels" about the thing both involve the same principles–operant conditioning. To call something "pleasant" or "gratifying" is simply to point out that it is reinforcing: "We call a reinforcer *satisfying*, as if we were reporting a feeling; but the word literally refers to a change in the state of deprivation which makes an object reinforcing."[10] Value judgments and ethical principles are thus techniques of control which function within the social environment and maintain certain kinds of behavior. Norms, rules (including the rules of logic), and laws are statements of the prevailing natural or social contingencies of reinforcement–and that's all.

Skinner believes that the processes of operant conditioning are products of natural evolution; in the same way, he says, *cultural* practices are products of *cultural* evolution. Of course, physical and social contingencies often work together, but the cultural contingencies are distinct: "The social contingencies, or the behaviors they generate, are the 'ideas' of a culture; the reinforcers that appear in the contingencies are its 'values'."[11] Genetic endowments, natural or physical contingencies, and the social or cultural contingencies *exhaustively* account for human behavior. People transmit both genetic endowments and cultural practices. Cultures are not isolated in the way genetic traits are, so practices and ideas are transmissible among people in general. Skinner claims that biological and cultural evolution are parallel, since cultural practices tend to contribute to the survival of a culture. Now, in order to justify his concern for the "improvement" of the conditions of people and the design of cultures, Skinner appeals to one "natural" value: "Survival is the only value according to which a culture is eventually to be judged, and any practice that furthers survival has survival value by definition."[12]

We cannot, of course, look to any *other* sources of value. The behavior of people and the contingencies of reinforcement involved constitute the *only* basis of a complete functional account. Feelings and thoughts are no more than by-products of environmental conditions. It will not do to look for the sources of value within the person:

> Do I mean to say that Plato never discovered the mind? Or that Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, and Kant were preoccupied with incidental, often irrelevant by-products of human behavior? Or that the mental laws of physiological psychologists like Wundt, or the stream of consciousness of William James, or the mental apparatus of Sigmund Freud have no useful place in the understanding of human behavior? Yes, I do. . . . this concern for mental life must no longer divert our attention from the environmental conditions of which behavior is a function.[13]

IV

Could *Walden Two* become a reality? Is Skinner's utopian vision, his call for the design of culture, supported by his science of behavior? Carl Rogers points out two problems that weigh decisively on Skinner's dream: the problem of *control*, and the problem of *values*. The former points to Skinner's vague formulations, the latter to his basic mistake. Rogers draws the obvious distinction between *external* control, *influence*, and *internal* control, and correctly argues that Skinner lumps together external control and influence under his use of the concept of control. Actually, Skinner's use of "control" is even more vague than Rogers suggests. "Control" refers to "strict functional control," "influence," "affect." "modify," "be related to," and "have an important relation to." The sense of "control"

which was advanced in his early methodology applied to the "bar-pressing" of white rats. This objective use loses all precision and objectivity when Skinner analyzes culture and human behavior at-large.

It is true, of course, that human behavior is "controlled"–especially if we use the word as vaguely as Skinner does. A pattern of deprivation or reward can "control" eating and drinking in the objective sense, although there are people who starve themselves for a cause, for a *purpose*. Threats of violence "control" in the objective sense, especially if the controller has the power at hand to carry through his threat. A tyrant with a good deal of power can require certain behaviors and an employer can make a job contingent upon certain prescribed actions. People may choose to obey the tyrant or behave appropriately for holding a job–though, as Chomsky points out, some may have the dignity to refuse: "They will understand the difference between this compulsion and the laws that govern falling bodies."[14] Even the objective sense of "control," then, is not incompatible with the "autonomous man" who evaluates and chooses. Freedom is indeed limited by natural and social factors, but Skinner's use of "control," which covers all instances of "relation," obscures the important distinctions between "strict functional control" (like bar-pressing) and other instances of "relation." As Chomsky notes:

> But it would be absurd to conclude merely from the fact that freedom is limited, that "autonomous man" is an illusion, or to overlook the distinction between a person who chooses to conform, in the face of threat or force or deprivation, and a person who "chooses" to obey Newtonian principles as he falls from a high tower.[15]

Now in terms of *values*, Skinner insists that the scientist will perceive the proper *applications* of his scientific discoveries. How any given discovery should be used somehow "appears" in the content of the discoveries themselves. The scientist need only note the relative effectiveness of techniques, since the application of the techniques is self-directing. Each experiment or investigation points the way to both further experiments *and* applications to human affairs. And herein lies the central problem. Skinner declares that the act of choice is a datum *for* science, so it must not be involved in the practice *of* science. This is simply not true. Any scientific endeavor presupposes that someone has decided to investigate *that* particular relationship, set of observations, or group of data. The purpose or value of scientific activity always comes from the outside–the purpose is a function of people and their decisions. Scientists are people, among other things, and it is a mistake to say that the subject matter of science can account for the *decision* to pursue science or for the *purpose* of designing an experiment. Skinner's absurd claim is tantamount to saying that the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was

implicit in the discovery of the bomb itself. On the contrary, the value of a particular discovery or observation is never self-evident. Between the *act* of science and the *use* of science falls the shadow of purpose and intention—even if the act of science is the study of people and their behavior. Science does not aim itself.

Skinner declares that whether we like it or not cultural survival is the one "natural" or ultimate value. Does this claim extricate him from his confusion of "fact" and "value"? He suggests that the final test of a culture is its ability to survive. Cultures that reinforce the appropriate behavior will survive. However, as Harvey Wheeler points out:

> This is not satisfactory either for it might lead to the conclusion that our contemporary primitives, such as the Australian bushmen, have a good reinforcement system for they have survived as a culture longer than most other cultures. It might even lead to the conclusion that a spectacular culture such as that of Athens, was inferior to the culture of the less glorious but victorious Spartans.[16]

Skinner's appeal to survival as an ultimate value fails for two reasons. First, in order to distinguish between different cultures and their survival, it is necessary to make some sort of *qualitative* distinction. Survival *itself* does not provide the necessary evidence. Yet qualitative distinctions are, say Skinner, the function of the verbal community and have been produced by social contingencies of reinforcement. His account runs in circles. Second, Skinner advocates directing evolution by human intervention into the course of cultural evolution. Looking to evolution for guidance, then, becomes problematic. Since evolution will be affected by human intervention, then the course of evolution will be, in part, the product of human values. Hence, to look at the course of evolution to *find* the ultimate natural value is to look squarely at the values placed into evolution by human intervention. His account again runs in circles. To utilize survival of a culture as the ultimate appeal for the application of Skinner's science of behavior leads to the conclusion that the interests of the culture as a whole are more important than the interests of any individual within the culture. A culture which was virtually intolerable to many of its members could *survive* for centuries. It may indeed be quite inefficient to consider the interests and whims and voluntary pursuits of individuals. But to subordinate the welfare of the individual within a culture to some future good for the culture as a whole is to encourage totalitarianism—however enlightened or benevolent.

Skinner's confusion between "fact" and "value" undermines his scientific view of human nature. It is good to be clear about this. Otherwise, we might be seduced by Skinner's suggestion that the purpose of the planned society is to provide more of the rewarding features of the world

to more individuals. We might be swayed by the suggestion that the founder of *Walden Two*, say, has planned a community over which he has no *current* control, so that it runs without him. We might even be convinced that the founder's achievement lies totally within his original plan. Our vision thus obscured, we might forget that the structure of the community is still totalitarian, a consequence of the confusion between "fact" and "value." The Board of Planners, the Board of Scientists, or whatever the maintainers of the utilized knowledge are called, are in possession of a natural privilege—the privilege of knowledge. Their dubious privilege involves knowing and applying a scientific (Skinner's) concept of human nature to individuals within the society. The fountainhead of such a society is the Skinnerian scientist managing a totalitarian technocracy, and though he would deny this, the totalitarian destination is possible only because Skinner thinks values are facts.

NOTES

[1] B. F. Skinner, "Freedom and the Control of Men," *The American Scholar*, Vol. XXV (Winter, 1955-56), pp. 47-55, reprinted in Peyton E. Richter, ed., *Utopias: Social Ideals and Communal Experiments* (Boston: Holbrook Press, 1971), pp. 289-304. Hereafter cited as "FCM."

[2] B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1948; paperback edition, 1962; also indicated as *Walden II*); Skinner's point of view is consistently represented in "Freedom and the Control of Men," see above; Carl Rogers and B. F. Skinner, "Some Issues Concerning the Control of Human Behavior—A Symposium," *Science*, Vol. CXXIV, Number 3231 (November 30, 1956), pp. 1057-66, hereafter cited as "Issues"; B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Knopf, 1971), hereafter cited as "*BFD*"; B. F. Skinner, "Humanism and Behaviorism," *Humanist*, Vol. XXXII (July/August, 1972), pp. 18-20, hereafter cited as "HB"; and B. F. Skinner, *About Behaviorism* (New York: Knopf, 1974).

[3] Carl Rogers and B. F. Skinner, "Issues," p. 1060.

[4] B. F. Skinner, "FCM," p. 289.

[5] Ibid., p. 293.

[6] Ibid., p. 296.

[7] Ibid., p. 302.

[8] Carl Rogers and B. F. Skinner, "Issues," p. 1058.

[9] B. F. Skinner, *BFD*, pp. 102-03.

[10] Ibid., p. 108.

[11] Ibid., p. 128.

[12] Ibid., p. 136.

[13] B. F. Skinner, "HB," p. 19.

[14] Noam Chomsky, "The case Against B. F. Skinner," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XVII, Number 11 (December 30, 1971), p. 23.

[15] Ibid., p. 23.

[16] Harvey Wheeler, "Social and Philosophical Implications of Behavior Modification," *Center Report*, Vol. V, Number 1 (February, 1972), p. 4.

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