

Skinner, B.F. *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1971.

B. F. Skinner (1904-1990 A.D.) was an American social philosopher and psychologist. His work involved operant conditioning of animals, and a denial of mental explanations of human behavior.

Chapter 1: A Technology of Behavior. Modern society has made progress on technical problems, but not on human behavior. Regarding behavior, we are still pre-scientific. We need a technology of behavior. We remain deluded by our language and thought patterns. We believe our talk about human autonomy (freedom), human merit and demerit (dignity), and human morality (values). These issues are negligible in understanding human behavior, which is nothing more than complex stimulus-response. We must discard mental descriptions. Though it is difficult to get past the mentalism embedded in our language and thought patterns, the attempt must be made. The technology of behavior must replace traditional prescientific thoughts about human behavior. The technology raises questions about its uses and goals.

Chapter 2: Freedom. Living things avoid pain reflexively. They also acquire reflexive aversions to non-painful events that lead to pain. Reinforcing events modify behavior, if positive by making it more likely, if negative, by making the behavior less likely. This behavior modification is called operant conditioning. Aversive control (spanking, punishments) have been the dominant pattern for social control. But negative reinforcers lead to withdrawal and revolt by some. So, controllers turn to nonaversive punishments. But such nonaversive reinforcers can have longer term negative results (deferred aversive results). Reinforcement schedule counts for more than reinforcement quantity. Consider the piece-work pay system or gambling. Deferred aversive consequences present difficulties because response is disconnected in time from stimulus. One must create concurrent aversive consequences. “Wanting” is not a feeling, but a predisposition to action. “Freedom” concerns the structure of reinforcements, not feelings. The literature of freedom attacks all controllers, overlooking the social benefit of control. We need controls by which to be rid of certain among them. We need not to destroy society; we need to redesign it.

Chapter 3: Dignity. We praise behavior we hope to see repeated. Praise is granted inverse to the obviousness of its causes. We do not praise where behavior is coerced or merely imitative. So, persons desiring praise hide the sources of their actions. The most highly praised actions are those that are incomprehensible to us by normal reinforcement analysis. Opponents attack behaviorism because it exposes the causes of praised behavior. Radical behaviorism will explain human behavior without recourse to “autonomous man.” There will be nothing left for which he can take credit.

Chapter 4: Punishment. Punishment aims to protect people from their own behaviors. Punishment, as a means of controlling human behavior, has undesirable effects. Punishment causes: psychological evasions in the punished (sublimation, displacement, projection, rationalization, etc.), creation of withdrawal environments (cloisters or Prohibition), or attempts to physically alter oneself (castration, drugs, lobotomy). We should design a world free of punishment in which people are automatically good because their environment makes them so. The core issue is to make people behave well (not be good). Moral goodness is inversely related to visibility of control. Responsibility makes individuals subject to punishment for their actions. Exoneration alleviates responsibility based on outside genetic and environmental features. But exoneration is flawed. The causal chain of human behavior has no beginning. Blame cannot be assessed. The behavioral controller is himself controlled. The literature of freedom and dignity exalts the executioner as the essential punisher. Rather, our goal should be to reduce the visibility of negative reinforcements and release mankind from the time-consuming tyranny of evading punishment.

Chapter 5: Alternatives to Punishment. Radical behaviorism seeks effective controls on behavior. Defenders of freedom adopt ineffective control measures. *Permissiveness* is one such. By abandoning control, the permissive controller guarantees individual autonomy. Permissiveness is the absence of public policy. *Maieutics* (midwifery) turns on the Platonic doctrine of knowledge, that the reincarnated soul needs merely to be reminded of what it knows. Freudian therapy and mysticism also adopt the maieutical theory. *Guidance* theory uses farming metaphors. One cultivates behaviors, as a seedling, well watered in a sunny spot, grows. There is, however, no predetermined pattern in human behavior to nurture. *Things* can control behavior, as a clock “tells” one it is time to act. Such non-human controls do not modify human behavior readily and can become counterproductive without social ameliorations. And things-control is derivative; we learn what things to depend upon from human controllers. The culture of freedom sanctions changing minds to the extent such control is non-coercive. Minds cannot be directly changed. One may prompt, set an example, persuade, reason. But if any of these activities grows effective (controlling), they are rejected. This is the problem with all ineffective controls of human behavior. Humans are never self-reliant. Humans respond to contingencies. Closely controlling the reinforcing contingencies creates human behavior. Weak measures, if effective, merely cloak hidden controls. Weak measures, if ineffective, are ineffective. Weak measures respect human autonomy, which does not exist.

Chapter 6: Values. A prescientific view grants at least some control to the individual. A scientific view grants that behavior flows from genetics and environment. Neither viewpoint can be proved. Nevertheless, the scientific view shall prevail. Questions about life’s meaning are a proper area of inquiry for behavioral scientists. Meaningful life is a datum to be observed.

Positive reinforcers are called “good.” Negative reinforcers are called “bad.” So, behaviorism is a study of human values. External reinforcers can be observed directly. Interior reinforcers are hidden from all but the one experiencing them. People produce pleasant things and avoid circumstances that cause pain. One must consider counterexamples: 1) altruism (acting for the good of others to one’s own detriment). Such behavior is induced by aversive controls, and also by verbal reinforcements of value judgments. One acts not out of love, but because the social environment controls. Feelings are by-products. They matter insofar as they affect behavior. Popper asserted, with Hume, that obligations cannot be derived from facts. He is wrong. Popper has missed the reinforcing contingencies underlying any human fact. When people find life meaningless, one can strengthen the old forms of controls. This is properly called reactionary and is wrongheaded. But libertinism is also wrongheaded. One must identify the reinforcers, the natural and the social, and manipulate those. There is a problem with positive reinforcement. If its effects are delayed, they become ineffective. Language permits people to learn of delayed effects without individually experiencing each such effect. Together, we are more; individually we are less, or nothing. Both reactionary collectivism and rabid individualism lead nowhere. We must seek policies that maximize individual reinforcement. And that depends on another sort of value.

Chapter 7: The Evolution of a Culture. Customs form a culture; customs are generated by the contingencies that reinforce them. These contingencies are ideas and values. A person influences and is influenced by culture. “Good” is what a group finds reinforcing, given its genetics and environment, social and natural. Values are culturally relative; only survival matters. Cultures evolve, as do organisms, and behaviors and genetic traits that are fit persevere. Why would anyone work for the survival and stability of a culture, given that the fruit of such labor lies beyond the life of the individual? A culture, to survive, must induce members to support its prosperity. But cultural evolution is not progress. It is not “growth.” There exists no telos, no goal. Nevertheless, culture has a direction. Culture teaches its members to observe consequences of actions.

Chapter 8: The Design of a Culture. Behaviorists can improve cultural development. To change behavior, change the subject’s contingencies. Skinner answers Chomsky’s critique of Verbal Behavior (that Skinner’s approach coins new terminology for old words, and the old words were better): contingencies explain intention and purpose more usefully than mentalistic

explanations. Behaviorist technology is “ethically neutral.” Utopias are synonymous with the unworkable. A behaviorist utopia is workable, though it will never be final. A behaviorist utopia may have unforeseen consequences, and those will have to be adjusted and rendered a source of learning. Consequences in a designed culture should be more predictable than current chaos. Some may not like a behaviorist utopia, but those persons will be changed by the designed culture to like it. Some argue that mankind will never accept control. But the behaviorist is controlled by his subjects, just as he controls them. A well-designed culture exercises counter-control on the controllers. Controllers should be part of the controlled group. Some argue that a designed culture is morally wrong. Such talk is antiquated; it means some acts have aversive consequences. Some acts create unwanted results: superstition and neurosis (due to extended leisure). To attack behaviorist controller’s control may cause human extinction.

Chapter 9: What is Man? Before we can engineer man, we must know how culture works. The self is created by its world. How does one “know himself”? There exists a “private” world experienced only by the individual, but it is a social product, as is all of consciousness. Knowing ourselves helps only to the extent it promotes desirable behaviors. Self-control comes from the human environment. Man is not a storage medium; the individual does not store genetics, personal history, memory, traits, philosophies, sin. Man is a body that “displays a complex repertoire of behavior.” Critics complain that man is being abolished. Only the autonomous self is endangered. One must be concerned about the degree of control contemplated by behaviorist utopia. Will not a few men make others into whatever they please? Man is already a cultural product, far removed from his natural history. A species has no existence; only individuals exist, but they exist in a continuum of human development. The behaviorist change of perspective is sweeping, but critical. We are a threat to ourselves. Mankind can and must remake man.