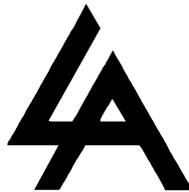


AGAINST BEHAVIORISM

THOMAS SZASZ

A REVIEW OF
B. F. SKINNER'S
ABOUT BEHAVIORISM



One of the things that distinguishes persons from animals is that, for reasons familiar enough, persons cannot simply live: they must have, or must feel that they have, some reason for doing so. In other words, men, women, and children must have some sense and significance in and for their lives. If they do not they perish. Hence, I believe that those who rob people of the meaning and significance they have given their lives kill them and should be considered murderers, at least metaphorically. B. F. Skinner is such a murderer. Like all mass murderers, he fascinates - especially his intended victims.

But, it may be objected, Skinner has no political or military power at his command. How, then, could he inflict such a grave injury on mankind? The answer is as simple as is Skinner's mentality. *Man qua* organism is an animal; to destroy it, one must kill it. *Man qua* person is the animal that uses language; to destroy him, one must destroy his language. This, it seems to me, is what Skinner is out to accomplish. Perhaps more than any of his earlier books, *About Behaviorism* makes this crystal clear. It is not really a book at all, but a dictionary: it furnishes us with the equivalents, in Skinnerese, of ordinary English words.

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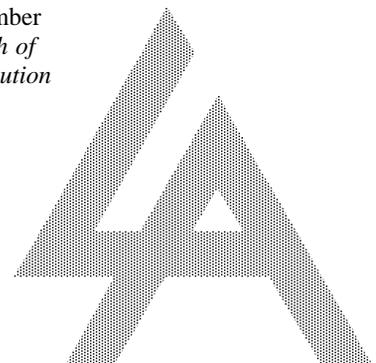
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Simply put, what Skinner is out to do is to destroy ordinary language and to substitute his own language for it. It is a sort of one-man Esperanto effort. Skinner puts it this way: "I consider scores, if not hundreds, of mentalistic usage. They are taken from current writings, but I have not cited the sources. ... Many of these expressions I translate into behavior." That is, indeed, what the whole book is about: translation - from English into "behavior". Skinner's pride at citing what others have said without giving their names is of interest in this connection. "I am not arguing with the authors," he explains, as if references served the whole purpose of identifying enemies. It seems to me that his not naming names is consistent with his general thesis that there are, and should be, no individuals. Books without authors are simply a part of Skinner's grand design of acts without actors - his master plan for world conquest.

What about Skinner's own acts, his speaking and writing? Is he not an agent and an author? Not really, says Skinner. In the first place, you and I may speak and write, but not Skinner; Skinner exhibits "verbal behavior," he writes in a chapter titled "The Causes of Behavior." Skinner thus disclaims writing in a language, which is asserting a falsehood, or having a style, which is asserting a truth. Instead, he claims to be exhibiting a physiological behavior, which is reductionism of the stupidest sort. But this is what he espouses:

For purposes of casual discourse, I see no reason to avoid such an expression as 'I have chosen to discuss ...' (though I question the possibility of free choice) ... When it is important to be clear about an issue, nothing but a technical vocabulary will suffice. It will often seem forced or roundabout. Old ways of speaking are abandoned with regret, and new ones are awkward and uncomfortable, but the change must be made.

To what? To Skinnerese. Why? To aggrandize Skinner.

IGNORANCE OF SOURCES AND OF CRITICS

Here is another sample of how Skinner sees the world and proposes to explain it:

A small part of the universe is contained within the skin of each of us. There is no reason why it should have any special physical status because it lies within this boundary and eventually we will have a complete account of it from anatomy and physiology.

So what else is new? Physicalism, biologism, reductionism, scientism - all have more eloquent spokesmen

than Skinner. Why all the fuss about him, then? Perhaps because he is a Harvard professor who is ignorant both of his own sources (for example, Auguste Comte) and of the many important critics of scientism (from John Stuart Mill to Friedrich von Hayek), thus making it not only possible but positively respectable for millions to believe that the drivel between the covers of his book is both new and good.

Skinner loves anatomy and physiology, although, so far as I can make out, he knows nothing about either. Perhaps this allows him to think that these "disciplines" can somehow explain everything. How else are we to account for such statements as these: "The human species, like all other species, is the product of natural selection. Each of its members is an extremely complex organism, a living system, the subject of anatomy and physiology." What is this, an excerpt from a biology lecture to bright second graders? No. It is Skinner's introduction to his explanation of "innate behavior". There is more, much more, of this. Two more sentences should suffice:

But what is felt or introspectively observed is not an important part of the physiology which fills the temporal gap in an historical analysis.

The experimental analysis of behaviour is a rigorous, extensive, and rapidly advancing branch of biology ..."

REDUCTION

Next, we come to Skinner's key concepts: "operant behavior" and "reinforcement". "A positive reinforcer", he explains,

strengthens any behaviour that produces it: a glass of water is positively reinforcing when we are thirsty, and if we then draw and drink a glass of water, we are more likely to do so again on similar occasions. A negative reinforcer strengthens any behavior that reduces or terminates it: when we take off a shoe that is pinching, the reduction of pressure is negatively reinforcing, and we are more likely to do so again when a shoe pinches.

Well, I simply do not understand this, but that may be because I have not grasped the fine points of Skinner's language - excuse me, "verbal behavior". Water relieves thirst. Taking off a tight shoe relieves pain. Why call one a "positive reinforcer" and the other a "negative reinforcer"? I have no satisfactory answer to this question. Skinner thinks he does, and I herewith quote it:

The fact that operant conditioning, like all physiological processes, is a product of natural

selection throws light on the question of what kinds of consequences are reinforcing and why. The expressions “I like Brahms,” “I love Brahms,” and “Brahms pleases me”, may easily be taken to refer to feelings but they can be taken as statements that the music of Brahms is reinforcing.”

Well, I like Brahms, but I do not like Skinner. But do not be misled: this is neither an expression of my ill-feelings toward Skinner nor an act of criticism of his work. Ill-feelings, as Skinner himself has just explained, do not exist; so I merely experience Skinner as “negatively reinforcing”. And in view of Skinner’s definition of a “forceful act,” mine is surely not a critical one. “Depriving a person of something he needs or wants is not a forceful act,” he asserts without any qualifications. Depriving a person of property or of liberty or even of air are thus *not* forceful acts. Skinner does not tell us what *is* a forceful act.

Although force may not be Skinner’s forte, he feels very confident about being able to explain why people gamble, climb mountains, or invent things:

All gambling systems are based on variable-ratio schedules of reinforcement, although their effects are usually attributed to feelings ... The same variable-ratio schedule affects those who explore, prospect, invent, conduct scientific research, and compose works of art, music, or literature ...

The irony of it all is that Skinner keeps contrasting himself with Freud whom, in these respects, he resembles and imitates. Freud attributed creativity to the repression and sublimation of all sorts of nasty “drives” from anality to homosexuality. Skinner attributes them to “schedules of reinforcement”. Anything will do, so long as it reduces the artist to the level of robot or rat.

EVERY HUMAN BEING A CONTROLLED OBJECT

As Skinner warms to his subject, he reveals more and more about his willingness to do away - in his science and perhaps elsewhere - with persons *qua* agents. “In a behavioral analysis”, he writes, “a person is an organism, a member of the human species, which has acquired a repertoire of behavior.” In a word, an animal. He then continues: “The person who asserts his freedom by saying, ‘I determine what I shall do next,’ is speaking of freedom in or from a current situation: the I who thus seems to have an option is the product of history from which it is not free and which in fact determines what it will now do.” That takes care of my personal responsibility for writing this review. I

did not write it at all; a “locus” did. I do not believe that, but Skinner evidently does:

A person is not an originating agent; he is a locus, a point at which many genetic and environmental conditions come together in a joint effect.

Skinner has an absolutely unbounded love for the idea that there are no individuals, no agents - that there are only organisms, animals:

The scientific analysis of behavior is controlled by his genetic and environmental histories rather than by the person himself as an initiating, creative agent.

This view leads inexorably to his love affair with the image of every human being as a controlled object, with no room, or word, for either controlling others (e.g., tyranny), or for controlling oneself (e.g. self-discipline). The “feeling” of freedom creates some problems for this scheme, but Skinner talks his way out of it, at least to his own satisfaction. He explains that

the important fact is not that we feel free when we have been positively reinforced, but *that we do not tend to escape or counter-attack*. (Italics Skinner’s.) Feeling free is an important hallmark of a kind of control distinguished by the fact that it does not breed countercontrol.

It is in the chapter titled “The Question of Control” that Skinner explains how in the world he is designing everyone will be controlled, everyone will feel free, and *mirabile visu* no one will control! As this is the capstone in the triumphal arch leading to his Utopia, I will quote Skinner rather than try to paraphrase what he says - for he is after all, quite unparaphrasable:

The design of human behaviour implies, of course, control and possibly the question most often asked of the behaviorists is this: Who is to control? The question represents the age-old mistake of looking to the individual rather than to the world in which he lives. It will not be a benevolent dictator, a compassionate therapist, a devoted teacher, or a public-spirited industrialist who will design a way of life in the interests of everyone. We must look instead at the conditions under which people govern, give help, teach, and arrange incentive systems in particular ways. In other words, we must look to the culture as a social environment. Will a culture evolve in which no individual will be able to accumulate vast power and use it for his own aggrandizement in ways which are harmful to others? Will a culture evolve in which individuals are not so much concerned with their own

actualization and fulfillment that they do not give serious attention to the future of the culture? These questions, and many others like them, are the questions to be asked rather than *who* will control and to what *end*. No one steps outside causal stream. No one really intervenes.

No one “intervenes”. Everyone is an “effect”. Amen.

THE DELIBERATE DESTRUCTION OF LANGUAGE

But enough is enough. I wrote at the beginning of this review that human beings cannot live without meaning; that they either create or destroy meaning; and that, in my opinion, Skinner is, or aspires to be, one of the great destroyers of meaning, and, hence, of man. This is the note on which I now want to elaborate and on which I want to end.

Although languages, George Steiner observed in *Language and Silence*, “have great reserves of life,” these reserves are not inexhaustible:

... there comes a breaking point. Use a language to convey, organize, and justify Belsen; use it to make out specifications for gas ovens; use it to dehumanize man during twelve years of calculated bestiality. Something will happen to it ... Something of the lies and sadism will settle in the marrow of the language.

Others - in particular, Orwell - have suggested that what has happened to the German language under the influence of nazism has happened to other modern languages under the influence of bureaucratization, collectivization, and technicization. Skinnerese is accordingly just one of the depersonalized, scientific idioms of our age - a member of the family of languages for loathing and liquidating man. What distinguishes Skinnerese from its sister languages - such as legalese, medicalese, or psychoanalyse - is the naive but infectious enthusiasm of its author for world-destruction through the conscious and deliberate destruction of language.

Skinner devotes a whole chapter of *About Behaviorism* to language. Aptly titled “Verbal Behavior,” it is devoted to the destruction of the idea of language. “Relatively late in its history,” Skinner begins, “the human species underwent a remarkable change: its vocal musculature came under operant control.” Skinner then explains why he wants to get rid of the word “language”:

The very difference between “language” and “verbal behaviour” is an example of a word requiring ‘mentalist explanation’. Language has the character of a thing, something a person ac-

quires and possesses ... A much more productive view is that verbal behavior is behavior. It has a special character only because it is reinforced by its effects on people ...

Translation: Do not say “language” if you want to be positively reinforced by Dr. Skinner.

Perhaps realizing that much of what he says is an attempt to replace a generally accepted metaphor with a metaphor of his own choosing. Skinner reinterprets metaphor as well:

In verbal behavior one kind of response evoked by a merely similar stimulus is called metaphor.

He evidently prefers this to Aristotle’s definition, according to which we use metaphor when we give something a name that rightly belongs to something else.

Finally, Skinner redefines “truth” itself. This definition is so revealing of his effort and so repellent in its effect (at least on me), that I shall end my series of quotations with it:

The truth of a statement 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.

Honest to God, this is what Skinner says is truth. He does not say what is falsehood. Or what is fakery. He does not have to: he *displays* them.

SLAVES WITHOUT MASTERS

These, then, are the reasons why I consider Skinner to be just another megalomaniac destroyer, or would-be destroyer, of mankind - one of many from Plato to Timothy Leary. But Skinner has the distinction, in this company, of being more simple-minded than most, and hence being able to advocate a political system no one has thought of before: namely, one in which all are ruled and no one rules! Plato envisioned a Utopia in which people are perfectly ruled by perfect philosopher-kings: here everyone was destroyed *qua* person, save for the rulers. Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler had their own versions of Utopia: like Plato’s, their Utopias were characterized by the destruction, actual or metaphorical, of large classes of mankind; but some individuals were still considered to be agents. Skinner has gone all of these one better. He has constructed a world of acts without actors, of conditioning without conditioners, of slaves without masters, of politics without politicians, of the good life without ethics, of man without language. It is an achievement worthy of a Harvard professor.