

CROSSROADS presents in this issue a matched pair of essays on related aspects of an issue central to contemporary thought. We intend, from time to time, to tap the available reservoir of faculty brain power, thereby raising our intellectual octane-rating.

Skinner Challenges Western Humanism



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Psychology Today recently devoted almost an entire issue to B. F. Skinner's newly published *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. *Time* followed suit with a cover and lengthy article. B. F. Skinner stands in the first rank as an American psychologist, and his new book, an intellectual event of the first importance, issues an unequivocal challenge to the Western humanist tradition.

Skinner draws a great deal of criticism not only from humanists in other disciplines but also from within his own field, from such individuals as Carl Rogers, who says that the experience of choice from within the personality cannot be disregarded, as well as from humanists in other areas. Some of this criticism hits the mark, whereas some of it represents only badly-focused hostility. Critics object to Skinner's *idée fixe* of designing an environment which will control human behaviour in such a way as to direct it along positive and socially constructive lines. According to them, Skinner belongs in the large fold of totalitarians who would abridge man's freedom.

Since he views man as just another albeit more complex organism than those with which he usually works in his laboratory, Skinner claims that man's behaviour is a function of his environment. Drug addiction, welfare cheating, delinquency, crime, and general maladjustments result from a defective social environment. This defective environment typically attempts to control human behaviour by imposing punishment for undesirable behavior. Punishment, unfortunately, does not show an individual what he ought to do; at most, it sets up in the individual tendencies to try to find ways to avoid the punishment. Skinner proposes to design the human environment scientifically, with an emphasis on positive reinforcement, i.e. reward, for correct behavior. Experimentally, it has been shown that animals can be taught to do almost anything within their physical powers through the use of positive reinforcement. Pigeons play ping pong and walk in figure eights within minutes.

Skinner says that the creation of a good social environment must be left to experts. They will work from a framework of community-owned buildings, plants, instruments of production, equalitarian relationships among men and women of all races and scientific child-rearing. They will construct a proper set of rewards for behavior which contributes to the social whole and man, being left free of the squabbles of power-seeking and of the frenzy to avoid punishment, will be left free to . . . pursue creative work and the enjoyment of the arts.

If Skinner can be correctly termed "totalitarian," at least he differs from other totalitarians in that the reliability of social planning would not be backed up by repressive discipline and punishment. Constant re-shaping and ironing-out of difficulties would take place until the individual, doing through pre-design what he wants to do "naturally," contributes positively. The social plan does not limit the interests of the individual; rather it grows out of what will, in fact, take place as the individual seeks his own interests. According to Skinner, punitive totalitarian regimes contain the seeds of their own destruction in the form of dissatisfaction, bitterness, and resentment.

Presumably most persons in our society would like to see an environment free from pollution, racial conflict, maladjustment, poverty, and hardship. Some might be willing to go along with Skinner's design provided they shared his faith that it would really work. Others, who clamor about the elimination of man's freedom, miss the point, for they have failed to grasp Skinner's central premise; that man is not free, that there is no "inner" self which "decides" on the basis of various "motivations."

In a lecture over a year ago in the Charlotte area, Skinner compared our present view of man with Aristotelian physics. Aristotle believed that physical phenomena behave as they do because each type of body had its own innate tendency; fire rose upward because it had a tendency to seek its natural place above the earth; stones fell to earth because they had a natural tendency to seek their place at the center (the earth being the center of the universe).

Until physicists gave up the description of bodies on the basis of internal tendencies and saw them functioning in terms of external rates of change, science as we know it did not get off the ground.

Likewise, so long as we think of man in terms of internal attitudes, desires, and motivations instead of seeing how his behavior changes as a function of the environment, we will be stuck with a prescientific view of man.

Unfortunately, says Skinner, the issue is of more than purely theoretic interest. For if we continue to allow man's unlimited self-seeking in a defective environment, we will either destroy ourselves or fall prey to a rival, totalitarian, regime.

To save our Western humanistic culture and have it function at a previously undreamed of level of human productivity, we must embrace the alternative of a scientifically designed environment. We resist doing so because of arrogance. We view ourselves as radically different from other organisms in a total environment; that is, we believe that there is a "free inner man" in an otherwise determined world.

Skinner does not propose to eliminate liberty in a practical sense, that is, liberty as people doing what they want to do. The planning of Skinner's world is based upon what man wants and upon what man can be made to want by positive reinforcement. *Walden Two*, an early novel, now in paperback edition, gives a vivid picture of what sort of world this would be and argues through, in dialogic form, all the pros and cons of Skinner's views.

We insist upon believing in this free inner man because we wish to take credit for what we do. When someone's motivations are obvious, we do not give him credit for what he does, inasmuch as it is perfectly understandable; in like situations, we scale down blame as well. On the other hand, we get a heap of credit where the reason for what we do is not obvious. To explain why one does something is always to give the environmental causes; to say that I do X because I have a free choice is to leave my doing of X unintelligible. Skinner says we must take the view of a behavioral scientist and be willing to surrender credit and blame; we must admit that we are organisms like others and that our behavior is a function of the environment. Once we come to this, we can get on with the job of designing an environment which will produce constructive behavior.

The premise upon which everything Skinner says either stands or falls is his denial of psychological freedom. Freedom as doing what one likes remains, but what one likes is determined. Psychological freedom is the view that antecedent conditions, while necessary, are not both necessary and sufficient to produce a given decision. The thrust of Western humanism is that freedom in this sense does exist.

In the utilitarian nineteenth century, Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground*, in which the central character devises every possible way to make himself miserable to prove that he is not "determined" to be happy. If Skinner's plan is workable, this sort of perversity must be limited to books instead of occurring in real life. Those of us who believe that man is free, will continue to believe that a systematic environment, no matter how good, can be upset by sheer "cussedness," perhaps the ultimately redeeming human trait. Thus, while we look for environmental improvement, it is difficult to share Skinner's faith.

Likewise, I think it fair to say that Western culture as we have known it cannot be preserved by scientific planning. The theoretic revolution which Skinner foresees and hopes will be soon enough for our rescue would change the entire meaning of man. The meaning of man as a free agent cannot be changed without a cultural revolution that would make all other revolutions (The Copernican Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the French and American Revolutions) look paltry by comparison. However, Western culture means an unswerving commitment to truth as well as to a certain idea of man.

Thus, it is both unfair and unwise to slough off Skinner's thought with empty slogans. I hope that Skinner's utopian plan can be tried on a small community basis, as outlined in *Walden Two*. It will be both feasible in terms of resources and simplicity as well as compatible with our present political system. If Skinner is right, it will work; and if it works, we should be willing to change our minds according to the evidence.