BOOKS

Beyond Freedom and Dignity by B. F. Skinner, Pp. 225. New York: Knopf, 1971. Price $ (U.S.) 6.25.

The dust-jacket offers this book as the definitive statement about man and society of "the great behaviourist B. F. Skinner". Readers of *Walden Two* will recognize this as a continuous development in Skinner's own name of ideas there presented through the mouthpiece of Frazier. What is not apparent is what, if anything, the new prosy and workaday version has which is not as well or better found in the earlier dramatic account.

Certainly some points came out more sharply there. Thus *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* begins with a review of "the terrifying problems that face us in the world today" (p. 3); proceeds to argue that to solve these "we need to make vast changes in human behaviour" (p. 4), so that "What we need is a technology of behaviour" (p. 5); and eventually concludes, "A scientific view of man offers exciting posibilities. We have not yet seen what man can make of man" (p. 215). Here there is no hint that the words 'we' and 'man' may not always refer to exactly the same collections of individuals. Frazier in *Walden Two* is more frank: " 'When we ask what Man can make of Man, we don't mean the same thing by 'Man' in both instances. We mean to ask what a few men can make of mankind. And that's the all-absorbing question of the twentieth century. What kind of world can we build — those of us who understand the science of behaviour?' " (Chapter XXXI).

There is, however, one respect in which *BFD* is more explicit than *WT*. That is in its memorably bizarre insistence that such a science must presuppose the rejection of any anthropomorphic view of man: "Although physics soon stopped personifying things . . . it continued for a long time to speak as if they had wills, impulses, feelings, purposes and other fragmentary attributes of an indwelling agent. . . . All this was eventually abandoned, and to good effect . . .". Nevertheless, deplorably, what should be "the behavioural sciences still appeal to comparable internal states . . ." (p. 8). We are, therefore, supposed to regret how: "Almost everyone who is concerned with human affairs — as political scientist, philosopher, man of letters, economist, psychologist, linguist, sociologist, theologian, educator, or psychotherapist — continues to talk about human behaviour in this prescientific way" (p. 9).

Confronted by such near unanimity a lesser person than a Harvard psychology professor might have hesitated. He might have wondered whether perhaps, after all, there is not at least some relevant difference:

between, on the one hand, the inanimate objects of physics, and even such animate brutes as rats and pigeons; and, on the other hand, men and women. But this would be Grand Inhibitor has himself no inhibitions. He proceeds: "If we ask someone, 'Why did you go to the theatre?', and he says, 'Because I felt like going', we are apt to take his reply as a kind of explanation" (pp. 12-13).

We are indeed. Nor is it a relevant objection to so modest an assumption to urge, as Skinner does, that this first explanation does not answer the further and different question why I have become the person I am; who, on this occasion, wanted to go to the theatre; and in fact, and for that reason, went.

Skinner's only actual argument for his more important conclusion, that it is old hat to attribute even to persons such unpigeonlike paraphernalia as "wills, impulses, feelings, purposes", is equally irrelevant: "we do not feel the things that have been invented to explain behaviour. The possessed man does not feel the possessing demon and may even deny that he exists. . . . The intelligent man does not feel his intelligence or the introvert his introversion" (p. 15-16). Certainly, if we confine ourselves to those examples, there is something in what Skinner says. But this something does nothing to destroy the obvious truth. The man, for instance, who confesses, 'I am determined to make it with Cyn', very obviously does have and knows without inference that he has, a will, impulses, feelings, and — definitely — a purpose in life.

The omens are, therefore, unfavourable for a putative science of behaviour thus committed rather to denying than to explaining some of the most familiar facts about the peculiar creatures we are. Yet the pretensions of Skinner's science can safely be left to others elsewhere. Indeed Noam Chomsky has already done a fine hatchet job in *The New York Review of Books* (30/XII/71). So consider next three statements about value; all of which could, and hopefully will, do yeoman service as exercise material in elementary ethics courses.

First: "If a scientific analysis can tell us how to change behaviour, can it tell us what changes to make? This is a question about the behaviour of those who do in fact propose to make changes" (p. 103).

Second, when you have got your breath back: "To make a value judgement by calling something good or bad is to classify it in terms of its reinforcing effects" (p. 105).

In each case Skinner's fault is, of course, failure to differentiate between *ought* and *is*; a Great Divide which, as Hume insisted, is "of the last importance". Let anyone who has been inclined to go along with recent attempts to collapse this fundamental distinction here ask themselves what, if Hume were wrong, they would then have to say about and against statements such as the two just quoted.

Third, Skinner quote's Popper's contention: "It is impossible to derive a sentence stating a norm or a decision from a sentence stating a fact . . .". Skinner comments: "The conclusion is valid only if indeed it is 'possible to adopt a norm or its opposite'. Here is autonomous man playing his most awe-inspiring role, but whether or not a person obeys the norm 'Thou shalt not steal' depends upon supporting contingencies, which must not be overlooked" (p. 114).

There is indeed something awe-inspiring here. It is the naive audacity with which Skinner rushes forward to challenge a logical contention, which he has not even begun to understand, armed only with weapons inherently incapable of ranging onto the target proposed.

The "autonomous man" of the passage just quoted is Skinner's favorite enemy: he is seen as the main prop of that human freedom and dignity which Skinner's book is explicitly against. Let Skinner explain himself: "Two features of autonomous man are particularly troublesome. In the traditional view, a person is free. He is autonomous in the sense that his behaviour is uncaused. He can therefore be held responsible for what he does, and justly punished if he offends" (p. 19).

Again it is illuminating to quote *WT,* where Frazier says: " 'I deny that freedom exists at all. I must deny it — or my programme would be absurd. You can't have a science about a subject matter which hops capriciously about' ". (Chapter XXIX.) Skinner too takes it absolutely for granted that that possibility of choosing an alternative course of action, which surely is presupposed by all traditional notions of human accountability and desert, itself necessarily implies libertarian freewill; uncaused causes, that is, causes with posterity and without ancestors. If this assumption were — or is — correct, then the actuality of that possibility would be — or is — a threat to all aspirations after a comprehensive and deterministic science of man.

Here I can only, but must, insist once again: that what Skinner takes as utterly obvious should never be allowed to pass uncontested; that such Incompatibilism is only one of two possible sorts of answer to the philosophical problems of freewill and determinism, and not their presupposition; and that the weight of authority — if that is to count for anything in a matter of this sort — is certainly on the side of the Compatibilists, holding that determinism is after all consistent with the ideas of choice and action. (Hobbes and Locke, Leibniz, Hume, and Mill were all in their different ways clearly Compatibilists; while Descartes and Kant seem to have wanted, with a generous catholicity, to hold both this view and its opposite.)

In this philosophical arena the protagonists of ambitious human sciences surely ought to be rooting for the Compatibilists. For that all men now, not being either straightjacketed or paralyzed, can move many parts of

their bodies at will is an inexpugnable certainty; a certainty which no future discovery ever could upset. So if this fact really does entail the reality of some measure of libertarian freewill, then there just are some uncaused causes here; and so much the worse for the fond wishes and hopes of inspiring behavioural scientists.

This fundamental fact that some behaviour can in some sense be helped is glimpsed by Skinner himself, as in a glass very darkly: "We do not waste punishments when they will work no change — when, for example, the behaviour was accidental or emitted by a retarded or psychotic person" (p. 51).

From the point of view of a political libertarian the most dangerous thing in his whole monumentally wrong-headed book is Skinner's systematic assault upon all the crucial liberal — and educational — distinctions.

Thus Skinner refuses to recognize any significant difference between a set-up in which abortion is illegal and one in which it is not. In the latter case, he says with a perverse sneer: "The individual is "'permitted' to decide the issue for himself, simply in the sense that he will act because of consequences to which legal punishment is no longer to be added" (p. 97). Yes; precisely in that sense! (Compare p. 71, on criminal laws forbidding people to "gamble, drink, or go to prostitutes".)

Again, Skinner considers "the practice of inviting prisoners to volunteer for possibly dangerous experiments — for example, on new drugs — in return for better living conditions or shortened sentences". He asks, rhetorically, "but are they really free when positively reinforced . . .?" (p. 39). Since positive reinforcement is just Skinner's fancy scientistic way of referring to the promised rewards, the correct answer is, clearly, 'Yes'. The contrast is, for instance, with those prisoners in Belsen and Dachau who were made subjects for medical experimentation willy nilly.

Again, "A person never becomes truly self-reliant. Even though he deals effectively with things, he is necessarily dependent upon those who have taught him to do so" (p. 91). But what self-reliance excludes is helplessness, not having been educated to be self-reliant.

Hopes rise a little when we read: "Permissive practices have many advantages". They are soon dashed: "Permissiveness is not, however, a policy; it is the abandonment of policy, and its apparent advantages are illusory. To refuse to control is to leave control not to the person himself, but to other parts of the social and non-social environments" (p. 84).

Now, first, even if I have got to be controlled either by a person or by impersonal forces, still the difference between these alternatives mat-

ters enormously. If, for instance, I suffer something painful I am much less upset if I believe this to be the result of blind forces than if I believe it to be someone's proposal to do this to me. (This is one reason why a moment's thought makes the ideal of a totally planned society so repellent to all but those who see themselves as the planners.)

Second, although Skinner keeps insisting that "A scientific analysis shifts the credit as well as the blame to the environment" (p. 21), this is flatly inconsistent with another of his claims, that it is a mistake "to put the responsibility anywhere, to suppose that somewhere a causal sequence is initiated" (p. 76). Certainly I do not myself maintain that there are any uncaused causes. But the moral is not that we cannot, but that we can, start anywhere. It is quite wrong to insist, as Skinner so persistently does, that a person's behaviour cannot be his own work, simply because there were also causes why he became as he is; that his achievement is not to any extent "his own achievement", simply because he himself had antecedent hereditary and environmental causes. (See, e.g., p. 101). I am none the less a father for having had one.

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