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Beyond the Punitive Society

OPERANT CONDITIONING:
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS

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Behaviorism's Enlightened Despotism

Chaim Perelman

Chaim Perelman, professor of philosophy at the Université de Bruxelles, is author of Justice and The New Rhetoric, as well as of numerous earlier works.

Continuing the philosophical evaluation of Beyond Freedom and Dignity, Perelman finds Skinner's arguments unconvincing. He objects particularly to Skinner's thesis that man's environment, not man himself, is responsible for his actions. Perelman suggests that, in a Skinnerian utopia, responsibility would be held by those who could transform the environment to condition their fellow men, and finds the prospect of a "behavioral scientist's enlightened despotism" frightening.

In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Skinner presses his behaviorist views to their extreme consequences. His answers to the philosophical problems that his views raise are not philosophically convincing. In order to show this, I propose to analyze more closely some crucial points concerning his conception of value judgments.

Let us look at this text: "To make a value judgment by calling something good or bad is to classify it in terms of its reinforcing effects" [p. 105].¹ Or,

¹Throughout this paper, page numbers in square brackets refer to pages in Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

When we say that a value judgment is a matter not of fact but of how someone feels about a fact, we are simply distinguishing between a thing and its reinforcing effect. Things themselves are studied by physics and biology, usually without reference to their value, but the reinforcing effects of things are the province of behavioral science, which, to the extent that it is concerned with operant reinforcement, is a science of values.

Things are good (positively reinforcing) or bad (negatively reinforcing) presumably because of the contingencies of survival under which the species evolved [p. 104].

Behavioral science is thus the science of efficacious values (operant reinforcement), philosophy being reduced to the study of inefficacious conditioning. Only by divesting philosophy of the fiction of man's autonomy will we be able to build an efficient science of values, to pass "from the inaccessible to the manipulable" [p. 201]. Thus, instead of reasoning about freedom and dignity, about justice and fairness, we should turn "to good husbandry in the use of reinforcers" [p. 125].

Consequently, if, in conformity with Skinner's ideas, we wish to know whether he has written a good book, we must not ask whether his argumentation is close and coherent, whether he is not making a confusion about the notion of value itself by reducing it to psychological states, whether he is not himself introducing value judgments of a nature other than that of those he has defined; rather we must ask who has been reinforced by reading the book. The answer is clear: the behavioral scientist—he who, relying on efficacy only, becomes the great manipulator of mankind by neglecting "weak methods of control," which do not depend on individuals but on other conditions [p. 99].

The author will not be surprised if those of us who are not behaviorists are not convinced by the argumentation in his book, for he was only presenting us "weak methods of control." If he wanted to be sure of convincing us, he ought to have conditioned us so as to make us feel the same sense of power that his book is supposed to give behaviorists [see the "wonderful possibilities" he mentions on p. 214].

Every military leader who has to fight an urban guerilla or a resistance movement cannot avoid facing the problem of torture. Must he use the most efficacious means, including torture, in order to get information? The idea of human dignity may somehow keep him from using the most cruel means, but why hesitate if they are indeed the most efficient means? Why should a doctor be restrained by medical deontology and hesitate to send men that are sane but opposed to the régime into lunatic asylums? If he does hesitate, the men in power may well use some "bad reinforcers" on him, and he will think that he is fighting chimeras. The idea of responsibility seems to be a metaphysical construction that has no counterpart in reality, when everything is a matter of more or less

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efficacious conditioning. According to Skinner, man is not responsible for his actions: "A scientific analysis shifts both the responsibility and the achievement to the environment" [p. 25]. It is difficult to grasp what this means, if not that—"the contingencies of action" being alone efficacious—a change of behavior can only be obtained by working not on the person but on the factors that condition his reactions. However, when it comes to "responsibility" and "achievement," the responsible agent will not be the environment, but those that have the power to transform it, while the behavioral scientist indicates in which direction it ought to be changed. In the behaviorist's outlook, the latter replaces the philosopher as auxiliary to the men in power. However, as a matter of fact, he will only be a tool for them. The ends of action will be determined not by him but by those having authority to manipulate him by all sorts of "reinforcements" in order to reward or to punish him. Indeed, the point is to know who will manipulate whom and to what end [p. 25].

We may wonder who will still bother about "good reasons" [p. 137]. The main thing is not to present what is true or right but what is expected to reinforce the sense of well-being of those whom one addresses. Skinner defines a better world as one "that would be liked by those who live in it because it has been designed with an eye to what is, or can be, most reinforcing" [p. 164].

But men yearn for immortality, and the ideas of an everlasting salvation or everlasting punishment in Hell have always seemed highly "reinforcing" for the bulk of mankind. So why not favor all efficacious myths, whether they be religious myths, the myth of the superiority of a race, or that of the dictatorship of the working class? Should we object to those myths because they are not in conformity with truth, as Skinner seems to suggest when he mentions an "explanatory fiction" [p. 201]? He has, no doubt, been badly conditioned himself, for the value of truth consists solely in the way in which it serves as a "positive reinforcement." If the myth is well-designed for our aims, the belief in it must be spread by conditioning men to accept it as true. The only criterion of a value being the way men "feel about it," they must be conditioned accordingly. If Skinner does not agree, it must be because he has been conditioned by a decadent society that rejects traditional values for the sake of an ideal of scientific truth. He should be taught his lesson by being sent to one of those camps where they use brainwashing techniques, such as Plato proposed in the *Laws* more than twenty-three centuries ago.

It may be that Skinner is right and that all ideas of liberty, dignity, truth, and justice are the result of centuries of conditioning with the aim of leading men away from the animal tradition that was originally

theirs. But then traditional education has, before him, done no more than adopt those methods that appeared most efficient for the survival of mankind. Such methods may not be objected to in the name of truth but only on account of their inefficacy. Should we say that efficacy is the only consideration that matters when it comes to action? If so, why stop at behavioral techniques of reinforcement? Why not use still stronger manipulations, such as those presented by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*?

Actually, Skinner undertakes to show us that the methods he advocates could lead mankind towards "wonderful possibilities." Why not towards "frightening possibilities?" In the course of history, all types of conditioning have been used by the men in power in order to get their subjects to submit. Why should it be otherwise in this case?

Skinner is guilty of supposing erroneously that values express what men feel, not what they should feel when they are faced with certain situations. Values are normative. However, though we all agree that truth, justice, and happiness are values, we do not, by any means, agree about the way in which they are to be interpreted in particular situations. When disagreement crops up in this respect, are there reasons why Skinner should resist suppressing it by conditioning the opponents, by giving them drugs, or by submitting them to a lobotomy so as to render them less aggressive? We know plenty of means to get rid of our opponents, but the advancement of civilization consists in a desire to convince them by arguments instead of by some kind of conditioning; this has been the age-old ambition of philosophy. I do not think the methods he advocates can solve the fundamental problem concerning which methods to use when men disagree about what ends to aim at in real situations. Does he suggest that we replace the various political systems, monarchies, oligarchies, or democracies by the behavioral scientist's enlightened despotism?

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