

to the editor

Dr. Skinner's world box

(The article in the Aug. 7 SCIENCE NEWS by Behavioral Sciences Editor Robert J. Trotter describing the concepts in Dr. B. F. Skinner's new book, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, has provoked unusual reader interest. Because of the importance of a full and open debate on the subject, we are devoting an expanded Letters section in this issue to readers' comments.—Ed.)

The article is most distressing. Dr. Skinner's purpose in writing *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* may be one or both of the following:

1. The book may be a psychological experiment aimed at testing the responses of his colleagues to the Voice of Authority. He can rest assured that the independent thinkers will quickly identify themselves.

2. By adopting an extreme but potentially avante-garde philosophical position, he hopes to be remembered in future centuries as a far-seeing prophet, when cultural and social events might permit his thesis temporarily to hold sway. Dr. Skinner knows well that the famous of one century are quickly forgotten in the next; perhaps he hopes by his outlandish position to be remembered beyond his lifetime. If this book were published in complete sincerity, then it illustrates the danger of extrapolating animal experiments into systems of human philosophy and psychology.

John T. Flynn, M.D.
Chief of Medicine
Beekman Downtown Hospital
New York, N.Y.

I object to the dehumanization of man. It cannot be denied that behavioral analysis is an important tool in understanding human actions. Animal instinct indeed influences what we do, but man has progressed far enough that he can take independent action regardless of the dictates of instinct.

Further evolutionary progress for man depends on freedom to act and to act directly for improvement.

Dissatisfaction with existing conditions is one spur to social and humanistic maturity. A controlled environment would deprive man of this. In *Brave New World*, social improvement was put in the hands of a select few; the people were delegated the right to rule themselves, and to actively correct the flaws of society . . . and corruption ruined that world.

Behaviorism is one key to under-

standing ourselves, but like other sciences, it is not a panacea for man's problems. Dr. Skinner's dependence on this one approach shows the flaws that exist in it.

Kevin Faughnan
Elizabeth, N.J.

The "review" (for "review," read "character assassination") of B. F. Skinner's book casts serious doubt on your integrity in selecting properly qualified writers to present technical material.

You might as well have assigned an analysis of the moon shots to someone who thinks the moon is made of green cheese.

Instead of presenting some of Skinner's arguments in synopsis, with a sophisticated critique, pro and con, you present a review totally critical and on the basis of what sounds like backfence gossip.

As an example, your author says, on page 96, that Skinner "destroys the concept of man as a free being." Nonsense! That's like saying that Einstein "destroyed the concepts of the Newtonian universe." What Einstein did, in part, was to restructure the ways in which we talk about certain aspects of the Newtonian universe. This led scientists to look for new relationships, to make observations they might not have made, etc. This, in essence, is what Skinner has done for many of us, in the area of human and animal behavior.

Your author says: "Instead of freeing man from all control [Skinner] suggests that new controls be found. Like a rat in a cage [sic] man will be happy if the proper techniques of control are applied." Point one: Does Skinner say that? I doubt it, but throughout this "review" there is, as far as I can see, only one complete sentence quoted, and there are no page numbers to refer to so that the reader can find the context of the quotes.

Point two: Who, besides psychotics, wants to be freed "from all control"? We reached the moon by saying: "There are powerful forces which keep us earthbound—let's study them and learn how to work with them." Make the analogy with "dignity" and "freedom."

Skinner has shown some of us some of the variables which keep us from being as "free" and "dignified" as we would like to be. I believe that my young daughter is somewhat "freer" and has more "dignity" because of relationships my wife and I have been

made aware of by Skinner's work.

I am not a "Skinnerian;" I simply know enough of the man's work to respect it. I would like to see in your periodical a sharp, critical review of this book by someone who knows enough about Skinner's work to give a sense of what he is doing at this point. We can certainly do without epithets such as:

"Like a rat in a cage" and (Skinner) wants to "put the world into a controlled environment—a Skinner box."

Shame on you for printing junk like that!

Bernard Basescu
New York, N.Y.

(Our presentation was a news article, not a review. We count six complete-sentence Skinner quotes—Ed.)

Thank you for the article about Dr. Skinner's psychology, "philosophy" and new book.

Arthur Koestler in *The Ghost in the Machine* has already eruditely, if not definitively, disposed of much of environmental absolutism and in particular made sport of Skinner's (to Koestler) simplistic theorems.

There is, and always has been by hominids, it seems, a compulsion to take any genuine but fragmentary discovery to absolutist extremes. So with Environmentalism, and Behaviorism, not content to have grasped a significant factor in the complex matrix of animal sensations and feelings and behavior, believers had to twist it from a useful discovery into an absolutist Cult.

Dr. Skinner's environmental absolutism applied to human behavior is, I agree with Peter Drucker, something like "pure romanticism."

Jack M. Webster
Corpus Christi, Tex.

Deft work on the Skinner book, especially the Drucker and Koch criticisms.

T George Harris
Editor, PSYCHOLOGY TODAY
Del Mar, Calif.

Dr. Skinner, in throwing out human freedom and dignity, also throws out all protection of the individual from the totalitarians among us. For the dignity of man we fought the Nazis. Belsen concentration camp shocked the world because it was a consequence of denying the dignity of man.

I call the attention of your readers to the excellent and still valid analysis (See p. 136)

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of "philosophical productions of the unsane" contained in *Science and Sanity* by Alfred Korzybski, particularly the sections on "over and under defined terms, wars of and on nerves, attitudes of philosophers and education for intelligence and democracy." In these days of turmoil, can we afford to let possibly inflammatory material go unchallenged?

Richard W. Lundberg
Santa Clara, Calif.

I would like to underscore the extreme practicality of Dr. Skinner's axiom: "only by dispossessing autonomous man can we turn to the real causes of human behavior." Those who deal with human behavior in terms of "intentions, purposes, aims and goals," are generally predisposed to "blame" the individual, and attribute "guilt" to his actions. These people, who constitute the majority, are then predisposed to judge and punish one who has violated their social code.

This prescientific kind of thinking is over 4,000 years old, and in that time has gotten us precisely nowhere. Even assuming the individual has "autonomy" the question remains, why did he employ his "autonomy" in such a way as to violate social norms? Even after positing "autonomy" it is still necessary to study his decision-making process in terms of his environmental and situational inputs.

Therefore, the first step is not to "blame" him or to "punish" him, but to recondition him with scientific methods so as to prevent a recurrence of his antisocial behavior. In a poll taken of 100 inmates at the Erie County Prison, the inmates unanimously favored a reconditioning program (including hypnosis, conditioning and medical treatment) over serving out their prison sentences of between one and three years. The only proviso was that the conditioning would take no longer than six months and would be humane. All that remains is for the judges and public to be willing to support and stand behind such programs. Clearly, the "criminals" were willing to make a sacrifice and do their parts. The inmates would have the option of entering the program or not. The program would be in lieu of sentencing. The program, incidentally, had a projected cost of less than one-tenth the cost of keeping them in jail.

Secondly, we must condition at an early age to prevent severely antisocial behavior. And thirdly, as Dr. Skinner says, we must restructure our environment so that it will be least likely to stimulate violation of norms. At the same time, the norms must not be so

capricious that it is difficult not to violate them.

We must roll up our sleeves and get down to the business of "inducing people to behave well." We must cast aside our self-pity and its consequent overindulgence with guilt and the need for a scapegoat.

The advancement of physical and biological sciences depends upon this "control" of which Dr. Skinner speaks. In fact, only when we harness human potential, through social control, can we expect to harness the power of the cosmos.

J. T. Wacker
Former Director of Rehabilitation
Erie County Prison

My father, who was not an educated man, always insisted that freedom and dignity were the most important graces, more important than either comfort or status, and that persons who failed to appreciate this fact were those who enjoyed too little of either—or too much of both.

Were he still living I am sure that he would have an earthy comment concerning to which group Dr. B. F. Skinner belongs; and that comment would be at the same time pungent, and sad.

Can we not freely admit that any grace above the conditioned reflex, the most complex behavioral accomplishment of which Skinner's rats are capable, such as freedom or dignity, may very well be a grace peculiar to man and his civilization, and as such completely artificial at the level of the rat?

George V. Morris
Sequim, Wash.

I should like to thank Dr. B. F. Skinner for his services to mankind. His first service is to prove to us finally that a behavioral or social science is impossible. He has taken the absurd notion that the methods of investigation applicable to the study of billiard balls or protons can be applied to human beings and with relentless logic driven it to its blasphemous conclusion. The myth of social science now stands exposed in all its naked Frankensteinian horror. Indeed Dr. Skinner's work is its own reductio ad absurdum. If he really believes that all human activity is caused by the environment, how does he know that his own pontifications proceed from anything more profound than a dish of rubbery tapioca or an underdone pork chop?

Dr. Skinner's second service is to rip the mask of benignity from his profession. His conclusions are equally repugnant to all forms of religion (incarnational, theistic, pantheistic or animist) and to secular humanism. They may be

able to coexist with the Stalinist mutant of Marxism, and there they may come to occupy a place of honor along with Lysenkist genetics.

From now on it seems impossible that anyone who believes in the humanity or dignity of mankind could dare refer a troubled person to the counsel or treatment of a profession, 56 percent of whose members think that Dr. Skinner is the greatest. Dr. Skinner may be hastening the day when the people of the world will rise against the tyranny of the psychologists and social engineers by burning them all at the stake. It is an auto da fe at which I shall be happy to dance the carmagnole. I only hope it comes to pass before I am too old to dance.

Dietrick E. Thomsen
Washington, D.C.

A group of responses named Skinner
Built a logical box and climbed in 'er.
Six walls and some space
All securely in place—
Surely such stimuli are a winner.

Allen Johnson Jr.
Middlebury, Vt.

Skinner has always been wrong. This book just continues to carry on in the same old vein. He wants to dispense with any notion that smacks of the occult and the mysterious and the subjective and the mentalistic and the intentionalistic. These are to him unscientific notions and hindrances to the development of psychology as a science. But what is a scientific view of psychology? Skinner has his idea on this. Does the scientific community accept this idea of science that when one studies man one must handle the human person as an object in a situation; a behaving object? But what is a behaving object? What is behavior? And what is environment. And how does behavior connect with environment? These questions are by no means answered definitively by the Skinner people.

Martin Wolfson
Woodridge, N.Y.

I must agree with Dr. Skinner's argument that our actions are dictated by our environment. But apparently he fails to consider the possibility that a personal, loving, absolutely rational being could be a part of man's environment. Perhaps such error in logic may be the fundamental reason why behavioral science has lagged.

Thank you for your continuing informative service, and for your standards of excellence in reporting relevant discoveries and theories.

William C. Dansie
Reno, Nev.