

Viewpoint

Is Behaviorism a Form of Humanism?

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There seems to be a great debate about whether the behaviorist position is actually a form of humanism. B. F. Skinner, MacCorquodale, and Day¹ are all proponents of the philosophy that "behaviorism is humanism. It has the distinction of being effective humanism."² On the other hand, Matson, Black, and Wheeler³ have serious reservations that behaviorism can be considered a part of humanism. The major objections to the inclusion of Skinner's behaviorism among the various humanisms are:

1. Skinner is not a humanist because he rejects the inner person and he argues that freedom and other "human" attributes are not inherent in humankind.

2. Skinner does not seem to operate with a moral system. He proposes that cultures that reinforce behavior properly will survive and those that do not will die. The test of cultural survival does not seem to be able to make a qualitative distinction among various cultures.

3. The problem seems to be: who will control the controller? Skinner realizes that "counter controls" are necessary, but he is vague about who will exert the requisite restraints. Of course, there are the other questions about the ethics of manipulation.

4. Can we truly make a leap from pigeons to people? Does animal research provide enough of a research base to make judgments about human beings?

5. Do humans actually want to give up their freedom for the paradise of a Walden Two? As Krutch has pointed out, no one has "yet established a Walden Two or Walden Three and neither has any man controlled with precision man's thoughts."⁴ Moreover, as Krutch pointed out,

Skinner seems to use "ignoble" means to create an "ignoble" utopia.

Skinner is forthright in answering his critics. Behaviorists are, Skinner points out, gentle people who are deeply concerned with the problems facing us in the world today. They are people who see "a chance to bring the methods of science to bear on those problems, and who are fully aware of the dangers of the misuse of the power they are creating."⁵ Behaviorism does not dehumanize man, it simply "dehumanizes" him. It rejects inner states and inner feelings that cannot be seen or measured for alternative explanations of human behavior in terms of genetic and environmental histories. It treats the person as an object, but as an "object of extraordinary subtlety and complexity."⁶

¹ B. F. Skinner. "Humanistic Behaviorism." *The Humanist*, 31(3): 35; May-June 1971; Kenneth MacCorquodale. "Behaviorism Is a Humanism." *The Humanist* 31(2): 12-13; March-April 1971; Willard F. Day. "Humanistic Psychology and Contemporary Behaviorism." *The Humanist* 33(2): 13-16; March-April 1971.

² B. F. Skinner. "Humanistic Behaviorism." *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³ Floyd W. Matson. "Humanistic Theory: The Third Revolution in Psychology." *The Humanist*, 33(2): 7-11; March-April 1971; Max Black. "A Disservice to All." *The Center Magazine* 5(2): 53-58; March-April 1972; Harvey Wheeler. "Social and Philosophical Implications of Behavior Modification." *The Center Magazine* 5(1): 3-5; January-February 1972.

⁴ Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Measure of Man*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1953. p. 67.

⁵ B. F. Skinner. "Humanistic Behavior." *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

A technology of behavior provides a method of analyzing persons and their problems in observable and measurable quantities, so that it may provide meaningful solutions to human problems. Behaviorism identifies the variables that affect behavior and, in doing so, "man is free at last to alter his fate—the course of his history, mind, not his inner essence—by, literally, exercising control in manipulating the variables that are already affecting his behavior for better or for worse."⁷

Behaviorism does not rob the person of dignity. Rather, behaviorism gives the individual the freedom and the choice to develop a society that will provide for the happiness of all persons. As MacCorquodale writes, only the authoritarian personality would say: "Don't teach, don't touch,

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don't tinker, let man choose, badly and stupidly and in ignorance, and live miserably. He is so gloriously free to do so. Let him."⁸ Since people are in a position scientifically to develop a better society, are they free *not* to do so? Behaviorism is nothing to be feared. The humanist, of all people, has the least to fear and the most to gain from the new knowledge of human behavior. The behaviorists are simply continuing the humanist traditions of inquiry, reason, and understanding. The human being is free, yet freedom must be understood as a matter of contingencies of reinforcements. Dignity is, moreover, a matter of due credit and positive reinforcement, and not of innate feelings.

From the vantage point of most humanists who begin with a different set of assumptions than those of Skinner, there are two critical differences that would make it difficult to consider B. F. Skinner and his followers a part of the humanist movement. The first is that Skinner does not allow for the personal control of the human being over himself/herself or his/her environment. The person, according to Skinner, is manipulated by

the environment. Most humanists seem to reject the notion that the human being is controlled by the environment. Rather, they assert that the person can control the environment and change it. Second, Skinner posits that the person does not have the freedom to make meaningful choices. The human being is subject to the choices of society. Human freedom seems to be a critical humanistic assumption. The loss of human freedom, for most humanists, is tantamount to the loss of the very essence of the person. From the set of assumptions of most humanists, Skinner can be considered a *humane-ist*.⁹ Such a person desires a humane world but may utilize "ignoble" means to achieve his/her goal.

B. F. Skinner's position is extremely important because he emphasizes the realities of the human environment and human behavior. Yet, his behaviorist position is limited because it deals with only the observable and the measurable. It cannot adequately deal with the total person. People are treated as objects and not as subjects. Skinner's method of positive reinforcement robs the person of decision-making power. It sees the individual as infinitely plastic without any sense of self. The human being is at the mercy of forces over which he/she has no control. Skinner seeks a homeostatic paradise where happiness always resides. His utopia robs the individual of personal dignity, democratic rights, and responsibilities. Skinner's model seems to deal inadequately with the real problems of human existence.

^[E] ⁷ MacCorquodale. "Behaviorism Is a Humanism." *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹ I am grateful to my teacher, Dr. Arthur Brown, of Wayne State University for this insight.



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