

Impoverished minds

Stuart Sutherland

B. F. Skinner: A Life. By Daniel W. Bjork. *Basic Books: 1993. Pp. 282. \$25. To be published in the United Kingdom by HarperCollins in November, £16.99.*

To become a guru, it is necessary to shout louder and longer than anyone else, but the message itself must either be so unintelligible that everyone thinks it important because they cannot understand it (compare, for example, Michel Foucault and some contemporary neuroscientists and physicists) or be so simplistic that everyone can congratulate themselves on understanding it to the full.

B. F. Skinner chose the latter method. He argued that all behaviour could be explained in terms of genetic factors and the history of reinforcement to which the organism has been exposed, a belief that is patently absurd: people learn about their environment when no reinforcement is provided. Again, it has been repeatedly shown that if people are rewarded for performing a task they find intrinsically pleasurable, they do it less not more. To overcome these problems, Skinner postulated the existence of internal rewards such as the satisfaction of curiosity or the thrill of fear, but this assumption means that behaviour is *not* controlled by external events and cannot be predicted. Nor can we control a given person's internal satisfactions. In fact the postulation of internal rewards flies in the face of one of Skinner's major tenets, namely, that there are no internal events: at times he even denied the existence of consciousness. Again, he did not appreciate the difficulty of defining what constitutes a stimulus or what is the action that is reinforced: Noam Chomsky commented that if you enjoy reading a book, you should immediately read it again.

Skinner's research was almost as empty as his theorizing, but he made three (and only three) contributions to psychology: curiously none of them is mentioned by Daniel Bjork. Skinner discovered that if a response is rewarded randomly on only some of the occasions on which it is emitted, the organism gives more responses after reinforcement is withdrawn than if all previous responses had been reinforced. (This discovery had in fact been made many years earlier by G. C. Grindley at Cambridge, England, but his work was ignored.) Second, Skinner pointed out that punishment is a less effective method of controlling behaviour than reward, because punishment merely stops the organism doing something, leaving it free to substitute any other form of behaviour. Third, Skinner was the first person to distinguish clearly between Pavlovian classical conditioning

and the operant conditioning on which he worked: unfortunately he ignored this distinction in his later years.

It is true that Skinner saw the desirability of recording behaviour automatically in order to increase accuracy (and possibly to allow the experimenter to slip out for a cup of tea in the middle of the experiment). To this end, using his con-

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Behaviourally flawed: Skinner (1904–1990).

siderable practical skill he invented the Skinner box in which the organism can effectively only make one response — pressing a key or pecking a panel: the device has been well described as a bloodless method of decerebrating both the animal and the experimenter. By his oversimplification, Skinner held back the progress of animal — and to a lesser extent human — psychology for a generation. The workings of the mind are extremely rich and by denying the mind's existence Skinner prevented his disciples from studying it. If Skinner had been right, psychology would be a dull subject indeed. Much to his dismay, with the advent of cognitive psychology, the richness of the workings of the mind and the possibility of studying them scientifically were recognized long before his death.

B. F. Skinner: A Life gives an impoverished and completely uncritical account of Skinner's scientific work. It is better on his attempts to influence the public, which started with his novel *Walden Two* depicting a Utopia in which everyone's behaviour was completely controlled by well thought out reinforcements supplied

for the good of everyone. Apart from the fact that, as we have seen, it is quite impossible to control people in this way, Skinner failed to ask what the ends of a Utopian society should be or who should decide those ends. He also invented the "Heir Conditioner" (a good name), which was an air-conditioned box in which a baby could live with freedom of movement and with a minimum of soiling from its own excreta, and he was one of the first to devise a teaching machine. None of these projects came off. *Walden Two* caused an uproar: although many defended Skinner's Utopia, others thought it resembled Fascism. A few communities based on *Walden Two* were established, but Bjork does not tell us what became of them. Skinner's attempts to market his Heir Conditioner and teaching machine were also a failure, partly because he appears to have had no business sense.

As to Skinner's life, Bjork records little of interest that is not to be found in Skinner's own three-volume autobiography. It is admittedly hard to paint a vivid picture of a man who denies having feelings or emotions, but Bjork completely fails at this task. What was Skinner really like? Ambitious, certainly; naive, definitely; kind to his family and associates, probably; genuinely interested in the welfare of mankind, unlikely. Moreover, Bjork omits much that is of interest. He does not mention Skinner's visits to Esalen, the Californian centre of humanistic psychology, where the psychotherapists Frederick Perls, A. H. Maslow and Carl Rogers strutted around in the nude among their army of (mainly female) disciples. Their views could hardly have been more antithetic to Skinner's own rejection of the self, for they believed not merely in the self but in "the true self" whose discovery frees one from mental disorder and anxiety and produces perfect happiness. What, one wonders, did the four of them discuss in the bizarre encounter groups that were one of Esalen's main features? Again, Bjork makes only one brief reference to Skinner's habit of providing himself with positive reinforcement by his notorious and obsessive womanizing: Skinner was a rummer character than Bjork allows.

The last time I saw Skinner I offered to take him and his wife up Magdalen Tower in Oxford, England. On seeing the narrow staircase, his wife declined because she had claustrophobia. When Skinner and I reached the top, he refused to go near the edge because he had acrophobia. Despite Skinner's faith in behaviour therapy, these examples seem to indicate that not all behaviour can be changed by a system of rewards and punishments. □

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