BOOK REVIEWS

Responses to Skinner

Beyond Freedom and Dignity. By B. F. Skinner. Pp. 225. (Jonathan Cape: London, March 1972.) £2.25.

THE first task on receiving Skinner's book is to try and distinguish between what the book says and what the small army of reviewers and commentators have already said about it. As early as last December, it was evident from talking to Skinner that the reception of the book in the States had surprised even this most controversial of psychologists. Now, having read it, I share his surprise. It neither aims at, nor achieves, the impact of Skinner's earlier novel *Walden Two*, and it says nothing which is not implied in the underlying philosophy of the novel. Its style is neutral, if not colourless, whilst its statements are too repetitious for dramatic effect.

What is Skinner's message? His statement is familiar enough to those who have followed his career over the last forty years. He is tilting at the concept of "autonomous man", the mystical postulate to which man, by long tradition, has attributed his thoughts and actions. To Skinner autonomous is equivalent to miraculous. The struggle for freedom and dignity has been formulated as a defence of autonomous man whose actions are controlled by his "state of mind or internal feelings". The world of mind has stolen the show for Skinner. His science of behaviour will bring back the observable world and then ask how much is left to be explained. For Skinner, if for no one else, it is crystal clear; behaviour is controlled by its consequences and this implies that it is the environment which acts upon man, not man upon the environment. As a statement of a behaviourist's position this may be blunt but it is not novel, so why the controversy? Skinner, more than any other scientist, has the experimental evidence to show how far behaviour can be modified by rewarding animals for their responses. It would be foolish to argue against him on these grounds. But is he justified in claiming such generality for his findings? Does he not go beyond the evidence?

Skinner asserts that within our society control is often random in the sense that it has not always been deliberately planned and rewards and punishments may be arbitrary. He would abolish any form of punishment, to which he has always been opposed, but he would accept and plan systematically for positive forms of control. He does not consider it possible to free man from some kinds of control. Man is a biological organism reacting to the consequences of his responses: he should stop dissembling and come to terms with the forces that do in fact control his actions. For many this smacks of man as a puppet, being manipulated by society and whether it is by carrot or by stick makes little difference. Skinner may dislike the stick but the liberal thinker objects to both.

But is the case for control of man as simple as this? Skinner could cite many examples in the animal world where exact control is achieved, but will man's behaviour replicate such experiments? It is worth considering an example in a field where Skinner has made a notable contribution—the development of teaching machines. For Skinner our teaching system was ineffective because often it required no response from a student, and where it did, there was no immediate reinforcement of the response nor any provision for a student to set his own rate of responding. Skinner devised his linear programme and teaching machine to meet these conditions. No one would wish to deny the importance of this development and the success it has achieved in teaching difficult material. But, as usual, the answer turned out to be more complicated than it seemed at first. If we continue reinforcing every response with a correct answer this form of reinforcement ceases to be effective. Constant reinforcement does not continue to produce a constant result with human subjects, for students soon complain of boredom. The most beneficial effect of linear programmes has been in the careful analysis of material so that each step was logically developed from its predecessor. It became apparent to workers in this field that a number of pedagogical theories were much more

closely related than their authors had imagined and that concepts such as reinforcement, feedback, knowledge of results, confirmation and so on, were not the isolated entities they had been postulated to be. I would argue then that in the very field where Skinner's ideas have been applied successfully, the results have not worked out entirely as he would have predicted. They have been beneficial, but partly for other reasons. It is a familiar research and development story.

Where does this leave us? We may agree with Skinner on the role of the "environment in which the species evolved and in which the behaviour of the individual is shaped and maintained". There is, as one critic discovered, a striking similarity between Skinner's position and Robert Owen's, which Skinner himself points out. But Skinner, unlike his critic, also observes that most environmental experiments, such as Owen's at New Harmony, failed because the environments were constructed on the model of other environments in which the desired behaviour had been observed. In the new Utopias, alas, the behaviour failed to appear. For Skinner it is not enough to shift the emphasis from inner man to the environment; "we must know how the environment works before we can change it to change behaviour".

The significance of this to our present social-environmental problem is clear enough but many psychologists would feel that they too lack the evidence to say exactly how the environment influences behaviour. We have made a beginning and no one has contributed more than Skinner in predicting some of the consequences. In this book, because he has overstated his case for control and because his analysis of autonomous man is philosophically weak, it is a safe prediction that most attention will focus on these issues. This will only splash ink around. Skinner's basic tenet that behaviour is controlled by its consequences is fundamental to biological organisms and research needs to unravel some of its ramifications for mankind.

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