The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 45 | Number 2 Article 8

May 1978

B.F. Skinner on Ethics and the Control of Retarded Persons

Harold Y. Vanderpool

B.F. Skinner on Ethics and the Control of Retarded Persons

Harold Y. Vanderpool, B.D., Ph.D.

Professor Vanderpool is assistant professor of the history of medicine in the Institute for the Medical Humanities, and assistant professor in the Department of Preventive Medicine and Community Health at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Tex. *The author wishes gratefully to acknowledge support from the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Foundation for the completion of this essay.*

In an important essay entitled "Ethics and the Control of Retardates,"[1] B. F. Skinner has outlined some of his opinions about the nature of ethical reflection and about policies which should determine the treatment of retarded persons. It is good to see a policy-maker like Skinner address himself to ethics, since it is clear that ethical principles play crucial roles in policy formation.[2] Yet, even though he discusses ethics in his essay, like many self-styled, tough-minded empiricists, Skinner believes that scientific facts, not moral reasoning, determine how people behave.

Skinner says that ethics should be equated with feelings and moods which are reflected in terms like "caring" or "moral outrage." He then dismisses these feelings as largely ineffective. They are ineffective because they are *derivatives* of the forces which truly shape human conduct, namely contingencies of psychological reinforcement. When he then sets forth his policies regarding the retarded, Skinner feels free to set aside feelings or ethical opinions as relevant for the shaping of human behavior. His thesis is that the design and manipulation of psychological reinforcements are the only effective ways to control the behavior of retarded humans.

In the light of my differences with certain of these opinions, and my curiosity about the nature of Skinner's moral thought, I propose

to accomplish three things in this essay: 1) to show that in spite of his denials, Skinner operates with an unconscious, yet nevertheless clearly identifiable set of ethical principles — sections one and two; 2) to demonstrate that Skinner's ethics play a crucial role in his policy formation — section three; and 3) to highlight several problems which appear in B. F. Skinner's ethics generally and his policies concerning retarded persons specifically — section four.

1. Skinner's Metaethics

Upon reading his essay on the treatment of the retarded, it is clear that Skinner, rather than understanding himself as indulging in moral reasoning, views himself as a psychologist-scientist who can explain why humans engage in ethical thinking and in turn can explain how ineffectual that thinking is. This is the case because Skinner reduces ethical language to various kinds of reinforcements. The words "good" and "bad," the sense of duty, the feelings of obligations, approval, anger, and so on, all reflect how human behavior "has been shaped and maintained by earlier consequences" or reinforcements.[3] Ethical utterances are essentially verbal ejaculations which reflect conditioning reinforcers or adversive stimuli in the same way that feelings are "by-products" of the reinforcements which shape behavior. In his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Skinner crisply put ethical judgments in their place: "To make a value judgment by calling something good or bad is to classify it in terms of its reinforcing effects."[4] This reduction of feeling and one of its verbal manifestations — ethical language — to the status of a byproduct of environmental contingencies is also reflected in Skinner's statements about stealing and mistreatment in his essay on the retarded.

B. F. Skinner's analysis of the sources of ethical language demonstrates that he regards himself as a noncognitivist. That is, Skinner does not believe that humans truly and cognitively *judge* between good and bad with active intellects capable of weighing dialectical (good-bad) decisions.[5] His noncognitivism is rooted in his empiricism and operant behaviorism in which all human behavior is regarded as contingent upon material, environmental feedback. Throughout his writings, he vigorously rejects any "pre-scientific" position which personifies the inner states and thoughts and feelings of humans. Personifications of human beings are "part of the armamentarium of autonomous man" whom, from the standpoint of operant behaviorism, Skinner purports to have vanquished.[6]

Consistent with noncognitivism, Skinner insists that moral censorship is invalid. He claims that only environments and genes are bad, not people. As he says, a "scientific analysis shifts the credit as well as the blame to the environment."[7]

Behind this moral neutrality lies Skinnerean determinism: humans who have no autonomous freedom from their respective environments cannot be blamed or credited for their actions.[8] Value judgments concerning people, including those who behave in *any* fashion toward retarded persons, thus should be avoided.[9]

Determinism and Noncognitivism

Skinner's determinism and its ethical partner, noncognitivism, serve as fundamental tenets in his approach to criminals, the retarded, and those who appear to be "insensitive" in their handling of the retarded. His proposals for improving the care of any of these groups thus center on manipulation of institutional environments, not the instilling of higher ethical values.

Although Skinner identifies himself with an ethical position which must be designated noncognitivist, he vigorously distinguishes his position from that of noncognitivists like A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson. Ayer and Stevenson were noncognitive emotivists who regarded ethical utterances as arising out of feeling. As "simply expressions of emotion," these utterances have no authentic, truth-claiming validity, claimed Ayer.[10] Versus noncognitive emotivists, Skinner claims that ethical sentences do not evince or express feelings. He argues that both ethical utterances and feelings are derivations or byproducts of the reinforcements affecting behavior. Two of the basic categories of these reinforcements are 1) personal reinforcers, such as food, drink, and sex, and 2) social reinforcers, by which humans are praised and rewarded depending on whether their behavior is considered important by the group.

Because of his emphasis on social reinforcers, Skinner can hold — as he does in his presentation on retardation — that ethical utterances are not merely reflections of personal reinforcers.[11] As part of the socially reinforcing context, ethical pronouncements may become reinforcers themselves. Ethical statements are nevertheless secondary or weak reinforcers, both because they are derived from non-verbal reinforcements and because they merely reflect or are determined by past influences from the environment.

In addition to noncognitivism, B. F. Skinner regards himself as a relativist. He says, for example:

> Each culture has its own set of goods, and what is good in one culture may not be good in another. To recognize this is to take the position of "cultural relativism." What is good for the Trobriand Islander is good for the Trobriand Islander, and that is that.[12]

Skinner is saying that "X is right" is equal in meaning to "X is a reflection of the reinforcing contingencies of the speaker." Thus, even as environmental reinforcements vary and change, so also what humans call "good" and "bad" change. Presumably, two speakers representing two different sets of reinforcing environments may well have

different meanings for the term "good" without either speaker's being wrong. Each is using "good" with regard to his own relative set of reinforcements.

By regarding nature — in this case natural reinforcements or contingencies — as subject to significant variation and change, this form of nature-based metaethics offers a surprising twist to other nature-based theories, all of which are forms of absolutism, not relativism. Nevertheless, Skinner's relativism is compatible with that of numerous social scientists who regard ethical maxims and norms as relative to respective cultural and environmental conditions.[13]

Skinner a Noncognitive Relativist

According to his own self-understanding, B. F. Skinner should be identified as a noncognitive relativist. Yet, since noncognitivists hold that humans do not make independent mental judgments or assertions about that which is right and that which is wrong, we may well question whether the terms "relativist" or "absolutist" should be applied to a noncognitivist metaethical position. In Skinner's case, however, a relativist-absolutist distinction seems important because it highlights his conviction that ethical statements are relative to reinforcers which vary significantly, even though he regards these utterances as having no independent cognitive validity. A noncognitive absolutist would then presumably identify ethical utterances with a set of non-varying causes.

To put the matter plainly, the problem with Skinner's ethical self-understanding is that he is neither a relativist nor a noncognitivist. His essays and social proposals, for example, are saturated with implicit absolutism. He does not regard the "good" about which he talks as merely relative to some specific social group, and hence only applicable for that group or for himself and those whose environmental reinforcements are exactly like his. Nor are Skinner's proposals set forth merely for those who volunteer to live in communities like Walden II, or for Americans alone, or even Westerners exclusively. Skinner is in fact surrounded by a majority of intellectuals whose definitions of human "well-being" include the notions of cognitive freedom and individual autonomy. Yet, instead of saying that their definitions of well-being are relatively correct because they reflect dominant views and reinforcements of their society, Skinner calls their thinking pre-scientific, fictional, endowed with "some fatal flaw," and so forth.[14]

Skinner's ethical absolutism appears at numerous points in his writings. One example is evident in his chapter on "Punishment" in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. In this chapter Skinner sketches in ghastly and powerful detail the horrors of torture and imprisonment. The entire thrust of his essay is that such treatment is *inherently* wrong. And he maintains that since punishment in somewhat milder forms is

acceptable to the advocates of freedom and autonomy (if a person is responsible for his wrong deeds, he should be punished), those advocates, even though they are in the majority, are *wrong*.[15] A second example of his absolutism appears in his essay on retarded persons. He refuses to be satisfied either with the care which was or is commonly accepted by society, *or* with the kind of care which would result from treating the retarded according to the positive reinforcements which normal, middle-class Americans find most satisfying. Retarded persons should be given food and leisure and entertainment only in accord with a set of absolute norms which Skinner believes are right and good for all.

Implicit, yet definitive, in B. F. Skinner's metaethics is an ingenious, unique form of nature-based absolutism. Indeed, one of the reasons why Skinner seems so willing and anxious to propose social reforms is that he holds tenaciously to a form of ethical absolutism.

The definition of "good" that constantly and implicitly underlies Skinner's reasoning is grounded in his understanding of the evolution of sensate life. He schematizes "good" into an ascending moral order based on the ultimate norm that good is that which is in accord with evolutionary *progress*.[16] His ascending order proceeds as follows: in the first place, immediate or personal reinforcers are *good*. They are good because evolution began and achieved significant force through the ability of creatures to sort out what was personally reinforcing from things (food, drink) and from one's fellow species (maternal warmth, sex, and so on). All other reinforcers derive their power from these.[17] On the basis of these reinforcers, animals became aware of the *consequences* of their behavior in relation to their respective environments, and this awareness or sensitivity is the dynamic key to evolutionary progress.[18] Nevertheless, Skinner judges personal reinforcers as possessing limited goodness. Upon them alone evolution would not have proceeded very far: no effective degree of behavior emitted;[19] no powerful, complexly-organized cultures developed; no status beyond savagery achieved.

In the second place, social or conditional reinforcers are *better*, even though "they derive their power from personal reinforcers."[20] These are reinforcers which influence humans to act "for the good of others," and include such factors as verbal reinforcements (praise, encouragement, moral utterances), ceremonies, and the actions of humans within numerous social institutions — educational, religious, political, economic. Although social reinforcers are less immediately gratifying, they have become more powerful than many personal reinforcements among the human species.[21] Controlled by their social environments, humans achieved extraordinary skill and power in the evolutionary process. They have learned to accumulate and transmit their learning and have moved to entirely new levels of self-management, security, health, and wisdom.

Remote Consequences, Deferred Reinforcements

In the third place, sensitivity to remote consequences in hopes of deferred reinforcements is *best*. This sensitivity is indebted to personal and social reinforcements,[22] but is not dependent on any current reinforcers. It is perceived as important, Skinner argues, because the most sensitive and successful creatures are more and more aware of the consequences of their behavior, and they somehow realize or are taught that their species could perish. Skinner seems aware that on the basis of perceiving "good" in terms of reinforcements, humans hardly have many reasons for regarding the survival of their culture as the highest "good."[23] He refuses, of course, to base their concern for survival value on factors like "feelings of loyalty," which for him are only reflections of contingencies. Perhaps genetic factors are involved.[24] Some reinforcers do, after all, depend on significant time lapses, such as how insurance policies are paid up *after* one's death, how five-year plans call for the suspension of gratification in hopes that greater gains will later ensue, and how religious concepts of the afterlife influence human action now.[25] He also knows through experimentation that *strongly* reinforced animals versus those weakly reinforced with regular personal gratification persist in working without continuous rewards. Nevertheless, in the last analysis, Skinner argues that ultimate sensitivity to the remote consequences of cultural survival is something that simply happens or will happen in the cultures that survive. This is exceedingly close to his saying circuitously that cultural survival is a self-evident truth for those chosen ones destined to survive.[26]

Skinner comes close to defining his implicit metaethics in a rather offhand assertion that there "is a kind of natural morality in both biological and cultural evolution."[27] For Skinner that is precisely the case. "Good" is defined ultimately as equal in meaning *to those dynamics of evolution which are responsible for human progress.* In ethical parlance, Skinner's metaethics is that of nature-based absolutism. Inherent good is identified with processes intrinsic to nature. Nevertheless, Skinner's highest norm of human survival, coupled with his attributing moral significance to the psychological processes behind evolution, allows him to select with great care which things from nature are good, better, and best. His metaethical principles keep him from identifying "good" with a single definition of "Nature's way," such as the norm "survival of the fittest" for numerous Social Darwinians. Yet, he still attributes ultimate value to natural processes. He would not agree with the counsel of T. H. Huxley that "the ethical progress of society depends, *not on imitating* the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but *in combating it.*"[28]

Even as Skinner is not a relativist, so also he is not a noncognitivist. Here again the ethical beliefs which Skinner theoretically abstracts

from his psychological theory contradict those fundamental beliefs which underlie his analysis. For example, in our discussion above concerning Skinner's absolutism, it is clear that his highest definition of good — namely human sensitivity to the ultimate evolutionary consequences of their behavior — is based on cognition, not on any current, noncognitive reinforcers.[29] Humans cannot, of course, be reinforced by their eventual extinction. They can only deduce, perceive, or imagine it is possible. The ultimate sensitivity to the remote consequences of cultural survival is clearly a cognitive, perceptual category, and the crediting of this sensitivity with ultimate ethical good is something that Skinner has deduced from a complex, intellectual analysis of biological, psychological, historical, and philosophical information.[30]

2. Normative Ethics

Distinguishing Skinner's theoretical noncognitive relativism from his actual cognitive absolutism makes it possible for us clearly to understand and explicate his normative ethical statements from an otherwise bewildering array of "shoulds" and "oughts." His normative ethical statements represent positions which include hedonism, altruism, egalitarianism, rule-keeping, and tolerant relativism. Our challenge is to understand and display accurately and critically Skinner's ethical priorities, and thus to build a foundation for showing why Skinner proposes certain policies with regard to the treatment of retarded persons and others.

Skinner's normative ethics reflect precisely the hierarchical ordering of moral "goods" displayed in his metaethical principles. He regards personal reinforcements as *good*, and hence talks at times in hedonistic terms. He says that he has enjoyed the pleasures of an "hedonistic ethic," and further asserts that in order for a culture to gain the "support of its members," it ought to "provide for pursuit and achievement of happiness."[31] Nevertheless, the thrust of Skinner's ethics opposes the maximization of personal pleasure. As he says in several contexts, including his statement on retardation, personal reinforcements alone have as their *consequence* the production "at best [of] only a 'feral' child" who is unable to compete strongly in the evolutionary process. In defense of this point of view, Skinner initiates a caustic critique of satiated, pleasure-gratifying hedonism, which he regards not as productive of useful, effective behavior, but rather as responsible for the environmental crisis and for many of the world's social problems.[32] It is little wonder that Skinner proposes that retarded persons ought not to be surrounded with leisure and gratification.

Behavior which contributes to the common good is *better*, because, as noted above, it furthers evolutionary success and survival. All humans — gifted, normal, retarded — *ought*, therefore, to seek to maximize what is socially reinforcing: to engage in efficient and productive labor, to contribute to socially-useful knowledge and technical

skills, to abide by rules and laws which reinforce the control of the social fabric, to develop greater self-management, to cease using punishment, and to promote a certain degree of justice.[33] The last two of these norms deserve special attention.

Skinner argues that humans ought not to punish each other, not because it is inherently wrong on cognitive or emotional grounds (which he regards as byproducts of human behavior), but because punishment does not produce efficient, useful behavior. Unlike positive and negative reinforcements, punishment, rather than encouraging or releasing "more reinforcing activities," decreases response, producing excessive timidity, anxiety, and a lack of adventurousness.[34] It is also inefficient in that the punisher has to be present continually in order to effect behavioral change.

Behind this critique of punishment is not deontological moral outrage, but the utilitarian principle that punishment does not produce the best consequences. And for Skinner, the norm for assessing these consequences is not maximized happiness, but maximized behavior which will most likely lead to evolutionary progress and survival. Punishment *discourages* this type of behavior. It is therefore *inherently bad* in Skinner's naturalistic schema which values evolutionary progress as ultimately or inherently *right*.

The role of some notion of justice in Skinnerean thought deserves further investigation. His conception of a utopian social community contains a degree of social and economic egalitarianism which exceeds that of contemporary democratic or socialist societies. A society in which menial labor is to be rewarded handsomely and professionally-enjoyable tasks much less reinforced is surely "more humanistic" than some of Skinner's critics have allowed.[35] Skinner furthermore praises "a democracy" in which the "controller of culture" places himself among the controlled. Yet he also senses that behavioral engineering does not logically and naturally need to proceed along democratic lines.[36] It may well be asked whether Skinner's egalitarian norm is logically grounded in his moral thought or whether in fact his form of egalitarianism seems "just."[37]

What Humans Should Do

Behavior which is predicated on a concern for cultural survival is *best*. So what *ought* humans to do? They ought to act, to work, to design, to make things and change things creatively, regularly, efficiently. They ought to behave like scientists who are not constantly reinforced by personal gratification, but are reinforced sparingly by incremental rewards and motivated by the remote consequences of cultural survival.[38]

In the context of talking about behavioral engineering, Skinner's ultimate normative ethical standard is most clearly seen. We must design a "better world," that is, one which is in keeping with the

dynamics of evolutionary progress. Its "wonderful possibilities" include the following: motivation via positive reinforcements, not adversive, punishing ones; human willingness to become self-controlled for the sake of the common good; diverse and new yet carefully planned forms of art, music, literature, and even religion; and inventive concern for new technologies which further human survival possibilities. Only in these ways will humans continue literally to shape their own destinies in accord with past evolutionary progress.[39]

B. F. Skinner's highest set of "oughts" have altruistic connotations. The "designer of culture" is not to act primarily for his own immediate good, nor for those of his friends and contemporaries, but for the good of those yet to be born. Although he may enjoy certain hedonistic pleasures and receive degrees of gratitude or reinforcement from his human contemporaries, he works vicariously. Yet in the final analysis, he cannot be credited with a "more finely developed ethical sense," for he ultimately reflects only the environment which molded him.[40]

It is now evident how Skinner's normative ethics, like his metaethics, is based on a norm selected from the natural order. We ought to act in ways which are in keeping with the laws of nature, but not in the same accidental and inefficient way that this process has unfolded in the past. Skinner is not simply a Social Darwinist like Herbert Spencer, for Skinner opposes forms of Social Darwinism or developmentalism which encourage humans "to stand around and wait."[41] He will countenance no resignation to the cosmic process.

In technical ethical categories, Skinner emerges as an eccentric, pluralistic-rule utilitarian. His normative ethical judgments are constantly made on the basis of *maximized consequences.* And although he clearly esteems a plurality of "goods," his ultimate principle of cultural survival becomes a norm or rule by which all other "goods" are evaluated.

3. The Treatment of Retarded Persons

Now that the distinction between B. F. Skinner's theoretical noncognitive relativism and actual cognitive, nature-based absolutism is exhibited, we have a clear conceptual foundation for understanding his policy proposals and ethical evaluations. We shall use his proposals regarding the treatment of retarded persons as a case in point.

Skinner argues, with respect to institutions for the retarded, that reform efforts based on the premise that moralistic feelings and moral codes are substantial and influential are bound to fail. Such reforms are both ineffective and misleading. They are ineffective because ethics reflect environmental contingencies rather than shape or reform them. If institutional environments are arranged so that reform-producing counter controls (or reinforcing contingencies) directly affect those who work in them, then what is considered ethically responsible

behavior will automatically ensue. If effective counter controls are absent, no amount of moralism or reform-oriented procedures will suffice.

These reforms are misleading because without a knowledge of behavioral psychology, reformers confuse what is reinforcing to themselves with what may be reinforcing to retarded persons. Moral reformers who are following such highly-valued maxims as the Golden Rule of Christianity ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you") or Marxism's social maxim ("To each according to his need"), find leisure and relaxation reinforcing. But these are not truly reinforcing for retarded persons.[42] What they need are not the "weak" reinforcers of leisure, gratification, and consumption, but "some powerful reinforcers by which the human species evolved and survived."[43]

At this point, Skinner's nature-based absolutism surfaces with great force. He is not content for retarded persons to be treated in any number of ways relative to numerous types of environments. They should not live hedonistic lives. Those who work with them should not follow the moral maxims of Christian or Marxist reciprocity. The retarded must be controlled by the "strong" reinforcements which have and will enable the human species to triumph in the evolutionary process. An example of a strong reinforcement is that of eating. If the retarded are given food only if they behave in certain ways, they will soon learn to "behave productively," that is, behave in ways that contribute "to the continuing evolution . . . of culture."[44] The behavior of the retarded is "good" if it conforms with the behavior which has enabled the human species to evolve to its present status. The "good life" for retarded humans is not comprised of leisure and gratification, but of social skills, greater personal independence, and accomplishments in art, sports, and science.[45]

So how should our institutional policies regarding the control of the retarded be formed? They should be formed not by moral feeling or caring, nor by the consensus which emerges from the clashing opinions of self-interest groups, as depicted, for example, in the ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr. Policies regarding retarded persons should be set by behavior scientists who recognize the ultimate "importance of productive labor for the strength of the culture" and who "can take the remote consequences of the environment into account."[46] That is, in the light of the ultimate consequence that the human species may not survive, behavioral psychologists know that humans ought most of all to be productive, to invent, and to contribute to culture so that annihilation will not occur; and they will design human environments accordingly. There is hardly a better example of the influence of B. F. Skinner's ethics on his policy proposals than on this point. Policies regarding the retarded must conform to natural evolution and must be constantly informed by the ultimate consequences resulting from human behavior. They must, that is, conform to Skinner's form of

nature-based, rule utilitarianism.

Skinner asks at one point whether it is ethical to do research on psychotics and the retarded without their consent. His answer is yes. It is for their "ultimate good" that such research is done; and it is through this research that they will be able to "make a real contribution" to a world in which others like themselves will live.[47] His justification for experimentation without consent is grounded in consequentialism. The ultimate consequences of such experimentation for the good of the world outweigh any moral qualms against inducing or forcing them "to participate as subjects of research."[48]

In dealing fairly with Skinner's proposals, we should refer briefly to the kinds of controls that he advocates for the purposes of changing humans. He does not wish these controls to be inhuman or dictatorial, and perhaps only time will unravel the ultimate consequences of Skinner's own proposals. Normal humans, argues Skinner, should not be changed in harmful or punishing ways against their wills. (Skinner, of course, would not use the term "will.") Skinner furthermore believes that change is to occur in piecemeal fashion, primarily as people are won over to, not forced to accept, the virtues of his plan. As we have just seen, however, he does not believe that retarded persons and psychotics need to be "won over" or convinced before experimentation can be done on them. Nor should the new order be uniform and unchanging — although diversity and change ought to be carefully planned and monitored.[49] Finally, rather than having the characteristics of an unnatural, uncanny order, Skinner's "better world" theoretically is continuous with natural evolutionary processes.[50]

The mechanism for effecting change is the use of extensive controls, and "control" has positive connotations for Skinner. He asserts that the "intentional design of a culture and the control it implies are essential if the human species is to continue to develop."[51] He thus justifies the use of control by his highest ethical norm of human progress and survival. He supports this emphasis on control with two other points. Since environments determine behavior anyway, it makes more sense to use identifiable, rationalized norms of control.[52] And given the present social-environmental crisis, it is now necessary to hasten the pace of cultural evolution. This cannot be accomplished without control.

4. Critique

Before focusing on selected problems in Skinner's ethics generally and his proposals regarding retarded persons specifically, I should emphasize that certain of his ideas regarding the treatment of severely retarded humans appear to me to deserve serious, if not enthusiastic, consideration. Operant behaviorism appears to make truly significant contributions to our understanding of human and animal behavior, and hence should be utilized toward moral ends. The criticisms offered

in this essay are thus to be construed as pointing to the problematic moral character of certain of Skinner's ethical opinions as well as to the problematic claims of omniscience made on behalf of thoroughgoing, deterministic behaviorism.

Furthermore, certain of Skinner's proposals, quite apart from his own ethical positions, hold promise for the development and well-being of many severely handicapped, retarded persons. For example, Skinner's highlighting of the need to distinguish between what reinforces retarded humans and what reinforces humans with normal or above normal abilities can be utilized as a valuable procedural insight for the influencing and motivating of the retarded, even as it is for the maturation and rearing of children. The question then becomes, "influence and motivate to do *what* for which *reasons*?" This places us squarely in the middle of normative ethics, and it is at this point that the norms of justice, gratitude, and so on, call into question the granting of ultimate value to the norm of evolutionary survival, as will be developed shortly.

Operant behaviorism can even be regarded as compatible with the kind of justice or reciprocity set forth in the Golden Rule. In his essay on the retarded, Skinner suggests that this rule conflicts with operant behaviorism because it means that we are to reinforce others with the same things that reinforced us. Skinner argues that those who follow the Golden Rule will thus seek to provide retarded persons with too much leisure and gratification. However, the reciprocity of this rule may just as adequately emphasize that we are to allow others to be reinforced to the degree that we wish to be reinforced. Reciprocity thus means that we are to share work and responsibility even as we are to share justly health, gratification, and personal fulfillment. Operant behaviorism is thus not a method which can be used only in conjunction with Skinnerean utilitarianism.

Three problem areas regarding Skinner's ethics and proposals call for particular attention. First, and genuinely problematic, is Skinner's lack of specificity concerning who are the psychotics and retarded persons about whom he is speaking. To be sure, vegetating human organisms and severely retarded individuals have been led to develop certain basic human skills through behavior modification.[53] Nevertheless, the great majority of retarded humans fall into an IQ range of from 50—70; and many of these individuals, once freed from the stereotypes of many public school contexts, seem to lead "normal" lives as housewives, blue-collar workers, small farmers, and so on.[54] Without question, moral problems are raised with respect to their bearing children and their social roles in society, but surely any wholesale dismissal of their right to consent to experimentation is replete with social and moral difficulties.

This criticism is supplemented by a second set of criticisms associated with Skinner's form of rule utilitarianism. Two of the crucial

problems for any utilitarian or teleological ethical position are those involving victimization and the sanctioning of "heinous crimes." Hedonistic utilitarians have been greatly criticized on these grounds. If the right act is that which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number, innocent persons can be victimized. On similar grounds, shocking crimes, such as the classic example of giving a poisoned piece of candy to a child, might not be prohibited. Surely the *prima facie* horror that such a crime evokes is at least greatly diminished when the morality of this act is assessed by its ultimate consequences. Rule utilitarianism developed precisely as an attempt to meet these kinds of objections to purely consequentialist reasoning.

Problematic Utilitarianism

Now if teleological reasoning poses problems for utilitarianism generally, as I believe it does, the kind of utilitarianism espoused by Skinner seems exceedingly problematic. Skinner's ethics gives the highest value to the remotest consequences of human behavior and has as a rule the principle of the survival of the *species*, not the individual. Skinner's form of rule utilitarianism thus intensifies, rather than eases, the ethical problems of ordinary utilitarianism.

Why, on grounds of the survival of the species, should the weak, the infirm, the retarded, the psychotic, or even the less intelligent or less virile be protected, or even preserved? And if evolutionary progress is due to increasing animal sensitivity to the consequences of behavior, as it is for Skinner, it would logically follow that retarded persons or everyone with sub-normal or perhaps not terribly high intellects could be regarded as distinct liabilities to social progress. On Skinnerean grounds, how would their presence be justified? One possible justification would be that they could contribute to human evolution by becoming the subjects of experimental research. This point, unfortunately, has not been lost on Skinner or other operant behaviorists.[55] We have seen that in his essay on the retarded, Skinner has little concern for the consent of the retarded or mentally-ill individual. His survival-oriented, consequentialist reasoning leads to a disregard of their "rights."

Skinner's consequentialist ethics raises further problems with respect to the protection, or lack of it, of normally intelligent and healthy individuals. This is true because Skinner's thought has no set of safeguards for the individual parallel to that of normative ethical theories that stress individual rights, the treatment of individuals only as ends in themselves, or a set of *prima facie* moral norms in which agreements and obligations are implicitly valued. In Skinner's thought the individual is jeopardized in a number of ways. Determinism says that he or she has no inherent personal uniqueness. Evolutionary consequentialism says that he or she has "only a minor bearing on the survival of the culture," and therefore is given a largely *inconsequen-*

tial status.[56] And Skinner's great emphasis on control raises far-reaching questions about the nature and extent of individual deviance which might be considered acceptable to the group.

The problem of individual deviance becomes acute when the new social order presumably exercises social control only by positive reinforcements, not by negative prohibitions or punishments. This new social order might at first sight be considered humane, but it becomes questionably virtuous upon closer scrutiny. Through its system of positive reinforcements, the society would define what is "good" and expect or assume that individuals would live by or reflect the good. Those who would attempt to live by some other set of "goods" would be breaking the norms of the society and would likely be looked upon as threats to the survival and progress of the society. This system in which "maximized good" equals "maximized control by positive reinforcements" contrasts dramatically with present societies which control human behavior primarily by prohibiting forms of harm, thus allowing multiple definitions of "good" to flourish.

Assume, for example, that a Huckleberry Finn was born into an ideal Skinnerean society. Huck is a prankster, a wanderer, a flaunter of social proprieties, an exposer of social pretensions, and above all, a lover of idleness and a passionate hater of work. Mark Twain well knew that Huck Finn with all of his resistance to civilization was an affront to a rule-keeping, hard-working, Puritan social order. To that order Huck was a problem, not because he broke laws, but because he lived by his own definition of goodness.

Presumably in a society controlled by positive reinforcements, Huck Finn would be re-reinforced so that the "automatic goodness" which Skinner admires would be forthcoming.[57] If this did not work, theoretically he would not be punished or called "bad," but he might well be treated as insane.[58]

An objection to this depiction of the problem of individuality in an operant society might be that such deviations as Huck Finnism would never occur in an effectively reinforcing situation where individual freedom and autonomy were recognized as pre-scientific chimeras. But this objection is based on the utopian notion that operant behaviorism would be literally perfected and on the philosophical-scientific assumption that the human mind has only the uni-dimensional capacities which Skinner attributes to it.

Third, we should recall again the problem which has been highlighted as the virtual leitmotif of this essay, namely the contradiction between Skinner's theoretical noncognitivist relativism and his actual conceptual absolutism. Readers of Skinner's works are easily confused by his discussions and proposals because Skinner the ethicist is often hidden behind Skinner the psychologist. Skinner the psychologist is saying that ethics count for very little in the arena of human behavior, while in fact ethical issues are playing exceedingly important roles in

Skinner's thought. Equally problematic is the confusion not of the reader, but of Skinner, the writer. Skinner, I am afraid, does not understand himself as someone who holds to an ethical position which can be scrutinized and criticized, but as someone who sets forth an objective, empirical, scientific point of view. On the basis of such self-delusion, ethical responsibility can be set aside and harm can be perpetuated in the name of science.

REFERENCES

1. This essay by B. F. Skinner was presented at "Choices on our Conscience," an international symposium on Human Rights, Retardation and Research, sponsored by the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation, Washington, D.C., Oct., 1971.

2. See, for example, Ralph B. Potter, *War and Moral Discourse* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966).

3. Skinner, B. F., "Ethics and the Control of the Retardate," pp. 1-3.

4. Skinner, B. F., *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 99.

5. See particularly the discussion in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, in which Skinner, in opposition to the opinions of Karl Popper, holds that it is *impossible* cognitively and dialectically "to adopt a [moral] norm or its opposite" (pp. 107-109).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 19; also, pp. 17, 62, 66-70, 77. See also B. F. Skinner, "Behavior Modification and Basic Research," in Sidney W. Bijou and Emilio Ribes-Inesta, eds., *Behavior Modification, Issues and Extensions* (New York: Academic Press, 1972), p. 4; and the discussion in Leonard P. Ullmann and Leonard Krasner, *A Psychological Approach to Abnormal Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), pp. 529ff.

8. Among the numerous attempts to criticize Skinner's determinism, see Phillip H. Scribner, "Escape from Freedom and Dignity," *Ethics* 83, 1972, pp. 13-36, and the forceful case supporting cognitive freedom in Finley Carpenter, *The Skinner Primer* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), chapters 3-5.

9. Skinner, "Ethics and the Control of the Retardate," pp. 7-10 and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, p. 66.

10. Ayer, Alfred Jules, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1946), p. 103; see also pp. 102-120.

11. Skinner, "Ethics and the Control of the Retardate," p. 3.

12. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, p. 122. Skinner later asserts that the term "moral and ethical issues" refers "to the customs of social groups" (*ibid.*, p. 165; see also pp. 107, 156, and 167-168).

13. See especially the analysis of Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), chapters 5-6, 11; and those of Karl Duncker, "Ethical Relativity?" *Mind* 48, 1939; and Roderick Firth, "Reply to Professor Brandt," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 15, 1955, pp. 414-421.

14. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 3ff.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 6. Skinner followed this chapter with an analysis of other forms of control based on the notion of human autonomy, all forms of which, he argues, "court disaster" (*ibid.*, chapter 7, p. 94).

16. For examples of Skinner's unembarrassed discussion of progress, see *ibid.*, chapter 9, and "Autobiography" in P. B. Dews, ed., *Festschrift for B. F. Skinner* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), p. 19.

17. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 96-103.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115, 136-137.

19. When Skinner says, e.g., that "immediate gratification" produces but little effective behavior (*ibid.*, p. 112), he seems to be drawing upon his research in which animals that have been continually and frequently reinforced with food and drink are quickly and easily frustrated when some lapse in reinforcement occurs. Indulgence produces no perseverance. *Cf.* the discussion in Carpenter, *The Skinner Primer*, pp. 27-30.

20. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, p. 105.

21. For example, humans will forego certain sensual pleasures for the sake of public recognition, honor, etc.

22. That is, personal reinforcements enabled humans to become aware of the fact that their behavior had consequences, and social reinforcements (*conditioned* on personal ones) made humans aware that being controlled by more remote consequences of their behavior (like building shelters *in order not to* get cold, or not stealing *in order not to* injure group stability) would redound to the benefit of the individual. *Cf.* Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 119-120.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 127-128.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-219.

26. Skinner's ultimate definition of good is stated and implied in numerous contexts. In one of these, he says simply that the ultimate sources of good are "found in the evolution of the species and the evolution of culture" (*ibid.*, p. 157; see also pp. 130-131, 143, and 150).

27. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

28. Vanderpool, Harold Y., *Darwin and Darwinism* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1973), p. 213. The quote is from Huxley's famous Romanes Lecture of 1893; the italics are mine. There are surely fascinating parallels and contrasts between Skinner and such figures as Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and even Pierre de Chardin. For introduced readings from Huxley and Spencer, see *ibid.*, pp. 199-215.

29. This point is also made by Noam Chomsky, *For Reasons of State* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 339.

30. See also the discussion of Skinner's own literary abilities by Joseph F. Rychlak, "A Question Posed by Skinner Concerning Human Freedom, and an Answer," *Psychotherapy and Behavior Change*, 1973, pp. 127-129; and the discussion of cognitive freedom in Carpenter, *The Skinner Primer*, pp. 127-175.

31. Skinner, "Autobiography," p. 17; *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, p. 145.

32. Skinner, "Ethics and the Control of the Retardate," pp. 2-3; *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 117-118. Skinner's views at this point are detailed and fascinating. *Cf. Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 96-105, 204, and Carpenter, *The Skinner Primer*, pp. 181-199.

33. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, chapters 4-6.

34. *Ibid.*, chapter 4, especially pp. 70, 76.

35. See Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948) and the discussion in Carpenter, *The Skinner Primer*, pp. 184-188. The quotation is from Carpenter, p. 188.

36. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 105-106, 164.

37. Skinner's lack of concern for retributive justice is a major facet of a broader analysis of justice that needs to be related to his thought. Space does not allow my initiating this discussion here.

38. Skinner's paradigm of the productive scientist as an ideal model is undeniably autobiographical. He was a scientist whose rewards and recognition were delayed. (See Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, p. 166, and "Autobiography," pp. 10-12, 16-19.) Skinner's research shows that incrementally scheduled rewards produce much more active animal behavior than continuous ones. See Carpenter, *The Skinner Primer*, pp. 27-32.

39. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, chapters 8-9, especially pp. 156, 204.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-136. The quotation is from a recent lecture by Skinner in which he opposed forms of "resignation" implicit in developmentalism.

42. Skinner, "Ethics and the Control of the Retardate," pp. 10-11.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-17.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

49. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 142-145, 148; Carpenter, *The Skinner Primer*, pp. 45, 178-184. In his most recent statements, Skinner has voiced his opposition to the power of large human institutions and his preference for human society's being organized like a kind of "benign anarchy." How this might be accomplished in the modern world raises no few questions.

50. Skinner is highly sensitive to the criticisms concerning the totalitarian overtones of his proposals. Knowing that his work involves "value judgments" and desirous of seeing culture molded "for the good of others," he believes, for example, that the designer or controller of culture should be designing a culture in which he also is to live. (*Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 19, 143-144, 155-157, 160-164).

51. *Ibid.*, p. 167; see also chapter 9, especially pp. 169-172.

52. This point is highly important for Skinnereans and is used as the justification for direct therapy or modification rather than indirect or "evocative"therapy. *Cf. ibid.*, chapter 5 and pages 169-172. See also Perry London, *The Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964), pp. 70-125; and Ullmann and Krasner, *A Psychological Approach to Abnormal Behavior*, pp. 243-269.

53. See the case studies in section 5 of Leonard P. Ullmann and Leonard Krasner, *Case Studies in Behavior Modification* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965).

54. There are approximately thirteen retarded humans between the IQ range of 50-70 for every one between the range 0-50, and approximately one severely retarded human (IQ range from 0-20) is born for every 61 between the range of 50-70. Standard discussions of retardation are found in Max L. Hutt and Robert Gwyn Gibby, *The Mentally Retarded Child* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1965); and Halbert B. Robinson and Nancy M. Robinson, *The Mentally Retarded Child* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965).

55. Skinner justifies operant behavioral research on human subjects by saying that it "will eventually . . . work for the good of billions of people" (Bijou and Ribes-Inesta, *Behavior Modification, Issues and Extensions*, p. 6). In working with an extremely retarded human, Paul Fuller remarked that perhaps "by beginning at the bottom of the human scale the transfer from rat to man can be effected" (Ullman and Krasner, *Case Studies in Behavior Modification*, p. 139).

56. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, p. 172. At one point, Skinner defines "a person" as "a member of a species shaped by evolutionary contingencies of survival, displaying behavioral processes which bring him under the control of the environment in which he lives, and largely under the control of a social environment which he and millions of others like him have constructed and maintained during the evolution of a culture" (*ibid.*, pp. 201-202).

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 68ff.

58. At one point, Skinner says that those who resist social controls too frantically represent "a neurotic if not psychotic response" (*ibid.*, p. 157).