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**Whatever Happened to B.F. Skinner and Operant Behaviorism?**

By Tal Davis

When I was in college, back in the ancient days of the early 1970s, I majored in psychology. Why did I pick that particular field? No good reason I guess, except that I thought it would be a good preparatory for going to theological seminary. In any case, I spent two years deeply engrossed in the study of psychology.

Now it is important to understand that psychology is a very broad field. It includes a number of various branches including clinical, experimental, physiological, social, and educational psychologies. It also involves learning a number of often contradictory theories about the human mind and behavior.

When I was doing my course work, one of the more popular psychological theories was called Operant Behaviorism or Operant Conditioning. That theoretical perspective was, far the most part, the offspring of the thinking of one specific scholar: Burrhus Frederic (B.F.) Skinner (1904-1990). After receiving a Ph.D. from Harvard, he taught and did research at several universities including the University of Minnesota, Indiana University, and finally at his alma mater Harvard. His two best known books were *Walden Two* (1948), a utopian novel, and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971), a treatise on changing society using his methods. Those tomes were highly influential, especially among secular psychological scholars and practitioners of that generation. As an undergraduate, I worked closely with several Ph.D. students who were all-in with applying Skinner's concepts in therapy and education.

Skinner's basic thesis was that the behaviors of all organisms, including humans, are shaped from birth to respond to external environmental stimuli which, over time, conditions them to act in certain ways. His theories were derived primarily from Ivan Pavlov's experiments on dogs, Charles Darwin's teachings that survival was life's highest motivation, and his own laboratory work on animals, particularly mice. Skinner found that animals were more likely to continue a specific behavior if they were rewarded in some way when a desirable act was performed. Conversely, animals were more likely to discontinue a specific behavior if they were not rewarded or were punished when an undesirable act was performed.

This was not a new idea, since animal trainers had used those methods for centuries. Skinner's contribution, however, was to describe in technical detail how the rewards and punishments actually worked to determine behavior. He established a rather complex system for behavioral training. He described operant techniques including positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, punishment, reinforcement schedules, aversive stimuli, etc. (I won't try to define all of the operant techniques in this article, it would require a lot of technicality and space.)

The fact is, Skinner's theories were shown to be quite effective, and by the early 1970s they were probably the most widely taught principles in most American secular university psychology departments. Older concepts and methods of psychology, such as Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) and Carl Jung's (1875-1961) Psychoanalytic Theories, which dominated the field in the 19th and early 20th centuries, were slowly losing their status in the academic world. Today, those

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theories, which had no real empirical basis, are virtually extinct.

Skinner's ideas became so influential that many psychologists had almost no place in their theories for the human capacity of mental thought. It was assumed that all that mattered was external stimuli and behavior. Skinner asserted that if you successfully conditioned people's behaviors by using operant techniques, then their mental processes would follow in line. In other words, it is not the mind that controls behavior, it is behavior that controls the mind.

Skinner and his near cultic followers (who we will call "Skinnerians") were so convinced of the truth of his theories, that he declared that all human behavior is absolutely environmentally determined and that free-will is an illusion. Their nearly dogmatic principle was that we are totally conditioned by our environment. We may think we are actually making conscious decisions, but we are really only acting in accord with our conditioned responses.

The scary part of Skinner's logic was that he even advocated establishing an authoritarian political system based on his theories. He proposed that an intellectual elite would, using his operant techniques, control people's behaviors in ways which would enhance their lives and society. This meant they would necessarily have to forfeit their freedom and the control of their own lives (whether they wanted to or not) – thus the title of his book, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Of course this begs the question, who are the benevolent wise men who will decide which behaviors are, or are not, enhancing to society? Skinner probably thought he and others of his ilk were naturally the best qualified.

Skinner's views were characteristic of the prevailing naturalistic worldview of his day. He made no secret of his Atheism, and, in 1973, signed the Humanist Manifesto II document. It should be said, however, that Skinner was probably not a real humanist in that he did not truly believe in human exceptionalism. That is also true of other secular humanists who assert the high nature of human life but whose naturalistic philosophical assumptions actually reduce human value to that of its chemical components. After all, we are just highly evolved animals – the products of blind chance. Unfortunately, that worldview is even more ensconced in academic and scientific circles now than ever. That being said, however, the rise of Postmodernism in this century has put some of those naturalistic assumptions in question.

As I said, Skinner's theories and methods were highly successful with animals, and, to some extent, in working with human beings. Young children and those with autism or special needs were found to respond quite well to operant methods for mitigating their detrimental behaviors. The fallacy, however, of Skinner's theories was that he believed they could be applied to all human beings. To his chagrin, he and other behaviorists found that the operant concepts they so strongly promoted were not as successful in shaping the behaviors of mature teenagers and adults as they were on animals and children (though they probably never admitted it).

The reason for that failure is that we adult humans have personality qualities that animals and small children do not. The most important such human characteristic is that we can think logically and analyze what is going on in our environment. In other words, we have the unique ability to look at a situation, think it over, then decide what we want to do about it. And while we certainly must take into consider-

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ation the rewards and consequences of our behaviors, our actions are not determined by them. We do have free will. Why will be explained below. (Note: Skinner's techniques did not always work with animals either because many species' behaviors are instinctual and not learned or conditioned.)

Ironically, in the middle 1980s, I took some graduate courses in Marriage and Family Therapy, a field closely related to clinical psychology. What I discovered was that the behaviorist models that I had learned as an undergraduate were no longer being so strongly advanced. In fact, they had given way to other newer theories such as Albert Bandura's (b. 1925) Social Learning (or Cognitive) Theory. His concepts took into account not only the external environmental and social factors affecting behavior, but also the inner reality and existence of the human mind and personal choice. That was heresy to doctrinaire Skinnerians.

Another approach that gained widespread popularity in the 1980s were the Family Systems theories of Murray Bowen (1913-1990) and Virginia Satir (1916-1988). (I do not know if the above theorists were Atheists or Theists.) On the other hand, many therapists, especially psychiatrists, now take a medicinal approach to treating psychological problems such as depression, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

(ADHD), Bipolar Disorder, and many others.

This review of the work of B. F. Skinner and others highlights an important difference between the worldviews of Naturalism and Theism. Theism (especially Christian Theism), in contradiction to Skinner's book, ascribes full freedom and dignity to human persons based on our intrinsic worth in the eyes of God. It reminds us all that we are not just machines or animals that can be easily manipulated by whatever theoretical approach is taken. (In 1972, Christian philosopher Francis A. Schaeffer wrote a brilliant rebuttal to Skinner's book titled *Back to Freedom and Dignity*).

We assert that since we are made in the image of God, we are thus capable of making rational and moral de-

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cisions. Our lives are not inevitably determined either by the environment or our genetics. We can decide if we do or do not want to exercise any specific behavior. Our minds have an objective reality apart from our physical makeup and free will is not an illusion. We can analyze an action as being either right or wrong. The western system of law is based on that presupposition, and if it is wrong our justice system is hopelessly flawed.

I hope this article has thrown some light on the ever shifting fads and trends of academic curricula, especially in the secular social sciences. What may be regarded as exciting and true today will be discredited and abandoned tomorrow. That does not mean I am against the study and application of psychological principles. I learned a lot in my classes. But what is needed is a changeless basis for our perspectives on God, the nature of humanity, and ultimate truth. The Bible is that standard.

Hopefully, Christian psychologists and therapists, along with psychology departments in Christian universities and seminaries, incorporate that principle in their methods and curriculum. My wife has a Master's Degree in Professional Counseling from such a solid Christian graduate school. Sadly, secular universities and most clinical practitioners will probably continue to ride the waves of theoretical capriciousness.