

B. F. Skinner: Reinforced by Life

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By Alfie Kohn

If a dozen people show up for one of these "sandwich seminars" sponsored by Harvard's Graduate School of Education, it's a good day. Every Thursday at noon, a different academic comes to talk about his or her latest research, and a few students drop in with lunch in hand. But on this chilly day in February, the seminar room is packed to overflowing long before 12:00. Students, faculty members, and others crunch onto window sills or maneuver for a spot on the floor. It looks like the Green Line at rush hour.

The crowd quiets when an unimposing old man is helped down the aisle. The man, who barely fills out his suit and has an unusually large forehead, takes his place behind the podium. And then Burrhus Frederic Skinner begins his talk.

Skinner is the most influential living psychologist – a distinction even his detractors will grant him – and the most important psychologist this country has ever produced. No one studies human behavior without learning his theories; indeed, his name is mentioned in the same breath with Freud's. At the age of 80, he continues to be the subject of articles in both scholarly and popular magazines. Late next month he will be the main attraction at the American Psychological Association's annual conference, giving a paper on freedom, Orwell's 1984, and his own *Walden Two*. He still draws crowds wherever he goes, and people approach him on the street to ask for his autograph. Of course, that he is a celebrity by now should come as no surprise.

But it surprises him.

"I'm always surprised that people recognize me or come to hear me talk," he says. "I don't know why I should be; I've been getting surprising audiences for nearly 30 years. But I don't get any bang out of it at all. I get much more pleasure out of a good two hours at my desk in the morning."

What B.F. Skinner (his friends call him Fred) does enjoy about his popularity is the chance to get his message out to more people. He is a proselytizer, preaching the gospel of behavioristic psychology. Briefly, he holds that an organism – which means everything from a pigeon to a person – does things that have pleasurable consequences. Make something pleasurable, present a positive reinforcement for doing it, and it will be done more often. Fetching the newspaper for a biscuit; working for a paycheck; causing a fuss for attention; deferring to other people's desires for approval – all behavior can be understood by means of this principle, he says. And all there is to human beings can be understood in terms of their behavior.

It is a controversial theory and an extreme one. Consequently Skinner rarely gets a good press. "Behaviorism is very badly misunderstood everywhere," he sighs. "I'm very badly misunderstood." A recent review of his autobiography in *Time* was "really nasty," as were other articles that he ticks off. "I don't lie awake nights about this," he adds. "That would be very foolish. But it bothers me."

Skinner was born in 1904 and spent his childhood in Scranton, Pennsylvania. He has vivid memories of listening to his mother complaining to and about his father. When he went off to Hamilton College, he was determined to become a writer. He dug into Shakespeare and Chaucer, graduating with a degree in English. But becoming a writer was more difficult than he had expected, and spending time with his parents the year after college was no easier. That year found him struggling with what most people would call an identity crisis. In fact, an article in *American Psychologist* several years ago tried to show how Skinner's thinking was influenced by what he came to call "my Dark Year."

The breakthrough came when he found the gospel of behaviorism. "I did not consider actual suicide," he wrote in his autobiography. "[B]ehaviorism offered me another way out: it was not I but my history that had failed. I learned to accept my mistakes by referring them to a personal history which was not of my making and could not be changed."

He had found himself by abandoning his self. A Ph.D. from Harvard followed, then academic appointments in Minnesota and Indiana, and a triumphant return to Cambridge in 1948. He has been here ever since.

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The alarm goes off at 4:40 a.m. at Skinner's comfortable house on Old Dee Road. He has been on this schedule for many years. Early to bed (before 8 p.m. these days) and early to rise gives a man the chance to work undisturbed before the phone starts ringing. It serves another purpose, too: When he goes to visit his daughter in England, he is able to adjust immediately to a standard business schedule, starting at 9 a.m. or so, without suffering from jetlag.

Skinner's wife, Eve, usually gives him a lift to Harvard. Although he is officially retired, he keeps his office on the seventh floor of William James Hall. In the outer office, his secretary is typing his latest article into the word processor. The books and articles on the shelves are mostly his own. This morning's mail, in fact, has brought a new collection of his essays, just published in Dutch. It will be placed alongside Skinner's books in Norwegian, Roumanian, Hebrew, Portuguese, and a dozen other languages.

Just across the hall are walls of circuitry boards, clicking and flashing their red lights. A visitor follows the wires to see what is being recorded. They lead to closed, numbered boxes with tiny peepholes. Inside of each is a pigeon, pecking away in order to be fed.

These pigeons are providing the data that fill B.F. Skinner's writings. A recent essay, for example, is called "Lying in the Pigeon." Actually, though, while most of his professional life has been spent watching pigeons and rats, most of his books are about human beings. People, in his view, are just very complicated pigeons that have developed the apparatus that allows for speech.

Sitting behind his desk, Skinner talks about his life. Sort of. He prefers to shift the conversation to ideas. Ask him how he feels about Harvard and he'll talk about the theoretical orientation of the psychology department. Ask him what he thinks of another psychologist, and he'll discuss that man's thought. Ask him whether he gets angry when he's criticized; he'll respond by regretting that so many people misunderstand behaviorism.

He's a hard man to get to know. He styles himself a loner, says he's had few male friends in his life. Harry Levin, professor emeritus of comparative literature at Harvard, once called him the most inner-directed person he'd ever known.

But he'll gladly give you the facts about his family. Eve, his wife of 47 years, is a gallery instructor at the Museum of Fine Arts. His elder daughter, Julie Vargas, is, at 46, professor of educational psychology at West Virginia University. She has written a book to make her father proud. It's called *Behavioral Psychology for Teachers*. She and her husband have two daughters, both off at school.

His other daughter, with whom he seems considerably closer, is Deborah Buzan, now 40 years old. A "very successful artist," he says proudly, and she has just written her first novel (still unpublished). She lives in London with her husband, a political scientist.

He won't say much more than that. In fact, his autobiography reads as though someone else were telling the story – someone, in fact, who doesn't care much about him. His mother's death is related without feeling, and the process of raising Julie and Deborah is described as if it were part of one of those efficiency studies in the 1920s.

Yet occasionally he will say something about himself that is not only revealing but positively poignant. "I do not admire myself as a person," he once wrote. What did he mean? He now says he's not sure what he had in mind. But he does add this: "I don't believe that I have a very high IQ; I think I've done very well with what I've got. There are skills I just don't have. Fortunately I got into a field where I could use the ones I do have – largely practical skills. I don't think I'm a classical picture of a great thinker, or anything of that sort."

Talk to him for a few hours and you come to see that he's right about that. His skills are mostly practical ones. He's known as the father of a theory, the promoter of a worldview, but he's really more a clever engineer than a brilliant theorist. The man is fascinated – indeed, almost obsessed – with problems of design. A more efficient hearing aid, for instance. Or a more comfortable environment for his infant daughters – the enclosed bassinets he called an "Aircrib." (Critics unfairly accused him of raising his kids in a "Skinner box" like the kind in which he keeps his rats. Bruno Bettelheim once spread a rumor that his daughter was psychotic as a result, he claims.)

He recently published (with Margaret Vaughan) a self-help book for the elderly, *Enjoy Old Age*, filled with practical suggestions for senior citizens. He spent years designing "teaching machines" for children that foreshadowed today's educational computer programs. ("I was 30 years ahead of my time," he notes.)

Everything is a problem to be solved, as Skinner sees it. "Designing a culture is like designing an experiment," he once wrote. And he talks about how, during World War II, he trained pigeons to steer missiles. He becomes ingenuously enthusiastic as he recalls: "What a fascinating thing! Total control of a living organism!"

(Project Pigeon was conceived in 1940 while Skinner was sitting on a train to Chicago. Thinking about the need to attack Nazi planes in the air, he looked out the window and saw a flock of birds. "Suddenly I saw them as 'devices' with excellent vision and extraordinary maneuverability. Could they not guide a missile?" He bought some pigeons at a poultry store and proceeded, over a period of many months, to design an apparatus such that a bird could peck at the moving image of a target and thus steer the contraption. He grew increasingly frustrated, though, with Washington's lack of interest in his invention.)

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We're trapped in traffic on the Southeast Expressway, Skinner and I. He's just finished speaking to my class at Phillips Academy's summer session. A few days before, the kids were contemptuous of his written treatments of freedom and values. But when he appeared, they suddenly became shy, wide-eyed, worshipful. No sooner had he finished talking than they were whipping out flashcube-equipped Instamatics and books for him to autograph.

We are sitting motionless on the highway, but he is characteristically gracious about the delay. The Cambridge cocktail party will just have to wait. I ask him about his politics.

"Well, I'm anti-totalitarian," he replies, rather oddly. Then he asks whether I've read Hitler's diaries. But where does he stand on today's issues and politicians? He calls himself a moderate Democrat, still fond of FDR and Harry Truman. He has just lent his name to the John Glenn campaign: "Now I have to find out what his positions are." (He later retracted that endorsement.) "The thing is to get someone who can beat Reagan, because I think he just stands for too many things that are impossible."

"I think Mondale's a fine man," Skinner continues, "but he just hasn't got what it takes. There's zero charisma. Someone has told him he must be forceful, and so he pounds the table. Tom Dewey was coached by Lowell Thomas, and I think that's why he lost the election." He laughs. The traffic moves about fifteen feet and stops again.

Soviet-American relations are interesting to him, and he shakes his head at Reagan's policies. "The only thing we can think of doing is threatening. It's like two people fighting. No one is sensible enough to say, 'C'mon, let's quit.' Someday something's going to happen by mistake, and that means the end."

But he won't lend his name to certain activities. "I don't protest," he says firmly. "I don't feel protest ever had much of an effect as a political measure. That's not my style." Eventually we are moving again, and I drop him off at an exclusive Brattle-area address. Before the car has stopped, he exclaims, "Why, there's my good friend Julia Child!" He leans out the window and hollers, "Joo-lia!" And then he is gone.

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Back in his office, some months later, and the subject is death. The man has just turned 80. He has, in the course of the conversation, acknowledged that he doesn't enjoy the theater anymore because of his hearing, he doesn't go out to eat because his taste buds are dulled, and he had to give up the piano because of his failing eyesight. "I'm in good health from the neck down," he says lightly.

I press. "I never think much about dying," he shrugs. "I have no fear of death. My family is well taken care of. The only thing I fear is not finishing my work. There are things I still want to say."

"I don't know why people fear death. Of course religious people do because they're not at all sure whether they're going to go to hell or not, but there are those who don't believe in that who still can't face annihilation."

To understand why B.F. Skinner professes no fear or even regret about dying, you have to recall what his behaviorism says about living. It says you are what you do, and what you do is a function of what's happened to you. There is no self – only a "repertoire of behaviors." There is no "you" who chooses or creates – only "environmental contingencies." So what's to lose?

He makes the connection himself. "I can now take all of my faults and all of my achievements and turn them over to my history, and the point I make is that when I die personally, it won't make a bit of difference. Because there's nothing here, you see, that matters. [With this view] you don't fear death at all."

And since living is about maximizing pleasure, the end of pleasure is reason to end life itself. "So long as I'm enjoying my life," he explains, "I'm going to go on living. When I don't, I'm going to stop. I'm not going to stay around when I'm not enjoying it; that's absurd. My wife agrees; my children agree. My wife and I have even talked about going together because one may not want to survive the other."

In the meantime, Skinner puts in a productive day, surrounded by pigeons in his office or by his own artwork ("early Skinners") at home. He reads biographies and history when he tires of science, and he listens to classical music at high volume. He spends time with such other Harvard academicians as Willard Van Quine, the philosopher, and George Homans, the sociologist. (Both could be considered behaviorists.) He works on papers and a new book, and he gives frequent talks – both here in Boston and elsewhere.

For the moment, then, life is still reinforcing for B.F. Skinner.

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