Up Close: Impersonal

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I very much appreciate Gerald Zuriff's (2001) thoughtful and generous review of my book *The New Behaviorism: Mind, Mechanism, and Society*, not least because I know that his admiration for B. F. Skinner is at least as strong as my skepticism. But I do want to respond to Zuriff's charge that the tone of my discussion of Skinner is "unkind and unnecessarily harsh" and that my observations "descend to the personal" (p. 269).

About the unkindness, all I can say is that Zuriff himself concedes that "Skinner's purposes were not those of a philosopher. . . . His goal was *propaganda* [italics added], to persuade society of the importance of behavioral control in social policy" (p. 268). Just so. Propaganda is good if you believe in the cause being advocated—or if the cause is objectively true, in which case it isn't usually called "propaganda" at all. My quarrel with Skinner is that he advocated social policies supposedly based upon science, whereas in fact they were largely based on his own prejudices. By using his reputation as a scientist to advance questionable claims, Skinner became a political propagandist disguised as a scientist. I don't believe it is unkind to criticize this behavior. It is scant comfort that Skinner was not alone in showing it. Sigmund Freud was perhaps the most skilled in presenting opinion as science, but it's a talent displayed by just about every social scientist who gives voice on social issues.

In support of his charge of "descent to the personal," Zuriff quotes my claim that Skinner always strove to

maintain the uniqueness of his position "through the adoption of an idiosyncratic vocabulary" (p. 269). In response let me give two pieces of evidence not in my book. First, I still recall my surprise as a graduate student at Harvard that when Skinner took his turn teaching the 1st-year proseminar his main concern seemed to be about technical language. Any tendency to use earlier terms like *instrumental behavior* or *stimulus generalization* was to be extinguished, and the appropriate Skinnerian terms—*operant behavior*, *conditioned reinforcement*, and the like—were to be substituted. There is nothing particularly sinister about a concern with proper technical terms, but the dominance in Skinner's teaching of what most would consider a secondary issue struck me as odd. The conclusion that this attempt to impose his own vocabulary was a self-conscious strategy became harder to resist as I learned the full list of equivalences between Skinnerian and non-Skinnerian terms for things that were objectively identical and for concepts that were still in flux.

Second, I just reread Skinner's famous paper on the "design of cultures" (Skinner, 1961) and was surprised to notice that he freely used the familiar biological terms *phylogenetic* and *ontogenetic*. But, as everyone knows, as soon as he made his own foray into evolutionary theorizing (Skinner, 1966), these terms were abandoned in favor of *phylogenic* and *ontogenic*—terms unknown to biology and uniquely identified with Skinner.

It is always dangerous for a biographer to infer motive. But I submit that given Skinner's lifelong interest in language as behavior reinforced through its effect on the behavior of others, and his almost obsessive concern with an

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idiosyncratic technical vocabulary, the inference that he consciously used it as a way to ensure solidarity among his disciples is hard to resist.

This take is not in any way a *personal* attack on Skinner. He was an amiable and fair chairman of my doctoral-oral committee and a forgiving French-language examiner. I should be very sorry indeed if I ever gave the impression that I have any personal animus at all towards a man whose bril-

liance in many respects I was happy to acknowledge in *The New Behaviorism*.

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