From a European Perspective: A Review of *B. F. Skinner: A Reappraisal* by Marc N. Richelle

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First, let's get one thing out of the way. Richelle's native tongue is French, and in the section entitled Acknowledgments he expresses some concern with respect to his command of the English language (p. viii). No apology is needed, however. I will grant that there are a few places, scattered throughout the text, where his choice of words or the sequence in which they are presented sounds a little strange to my ear, but I hasten to assure prospective readers that these occasions are rare and that they do not interfere with one's progress through the text. Indeed, most of the writing flows quite smoothly and rhythmically, and the ideas are clearly expressed. Would that more of our native speakers could communicate this well!

The book is organized in 16 relatively brief chapters. It is not a biography. For a survey of Skinner's life and professional activities, especially those directed toward applications rather than basic science, I would recommend Daniel Bjork's account (1993). Bjork draws heavily on Skinner's personal notes but nonetheless presents considerable material that did not appear in the autobiographical volumes (Skinner 1976, 1979, 1983). (For a review of Bjork, see Wood, 1994.) Nor does Richelle's book provide much coverage of Skinner's research or his contributions to the central core of psychological theory (for some comments on his theoretical contributions, see Dinsmoor, 1988/in press-a, in press-b). It is the sort of book that might well have appeared under some very broad title like *The Thought of B. F. Skinner*. In essence, it

is a resume of Skinner's writings on such topics as the descriptive or radical behaviorist approach to psychology, his social views, and his contributions to education and therapy. There is also a sequence of chapters on "Skinner and the European Tradition," in which the author compares Skinner with four well-known figures from that continent (Pavlov, Freud, Piaget, and Lorenz). These chapters may be revealing to anyone who thinks Skinner stands in complete isolation, outside of the traditional psychological spectrum.

Some Disagreements

Although it is evident that Richelle is both astute and sophisticated in most of his assessments, there are occasional lapses. For example, I think on page 3 he overstates the influence of behaviorism within contemporary psychology ("has dominated the scene") and understates the influence of Skinner as an individual, at least as viewed in this country. In a fairly recent poll of the chairpersons of psychology departments throughout the United States, Skinner was rated the single most eminent contributor of all time (Korn, Davis, & Davis, 1991). This ranking was not matched by the results from a small sample of historians of psychology, published in the same source, but these respondents were not representative of psychology as a whole. The ranking by the chairpersons was consistent with the results of an earlier but broader survey of 2,340 graduate students and their faculty in which "Skinner alone received about 13% of both the student and faculty responses to the most-respected-person item, outdistancing his nearest competitors by margins of two to one or more" (Lipsey, 1974, p. 545).

Richelle states that "it was not until operant procedures were available that

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data on animal sensation could be collected with the same degree of rigour as in humans" (p. 31). This statement overlooks the fact that Pavlovian conditioning was originally welcomed by American psychologists as a method of doing precisely that (Razran & Warden, 1929; Watson, 1916; Yerkes & Morgulis, 1909). And considerable work was already being conducted with other techniques that may have been relatively crude but that were unimpeachably objective (see Washburn, 1908; Watson, 1914).

There are also a couple of passages that are surprisingly negative in tone toward rank-and-file behavior analysts. In the preface, Richelle blames Skinner's "disciples" for "most of the controversies" surrounding Skinner himself, claiming that "they have isolated themselves from the rest of scientific psychology by creating their own journals and societies, by closing themselves to open dialogue with other trends and developing a sense of orthodoxy" (p. x). On page 60, he repeats the same criticism, adding that "it would not be the first time in history . . . that disciples obstruct a master's message."

I question this interpretation. One of its sources may have been an argument by exclusion: In his personal interactions during the late 1950s and the 1960s, Richelle found Skinner to be mild and gentle in his demeanor (but see Bjork, 1993, p. 113); the provocation, then, must have come from someone else. Another source of Richelle's interpretation may have been an attack by Proctor and Weeks (1990), which is cited in an accompanying footnote (p. xii). (For further comment on Proctor and Weeks, see Newland, 1992.) Note that Richelle has had relatively little direct contact with those he criticizes. True, behavior analysts have founded their own societies and journals, as Richelle says, but so have cognitive psychologists, Freudians, Pavlovians, and those of various other theoretical persuasions within the profession. Most of the behavior analysts I have known seem eager to engage in the exchange of ideas with people supporting other points of view. If there is anything in their behavior that may have put people off, it is not a reluctance to engage in dialogue but

almost the opposite trait: a touch of missionary zeal, coupled with an assurance of superiority, a questioning of the scientific status of other brands of psychology. That could be hard to take. However, I cannot entirely absolve Skinner himself of the same charge (see Rice, 1968, p. 90), and in his later years I saw occasional flashes of a rather testy attitude toward certain individuals who had published comments critical of his point of view.

Furthermore, it is difficult to blame Skinner's supporters for direct reactions to his writings on such topics as the air crib (pp. 21–22), verbal behavior (Chomsky, 1959), and programmed instruction (p. 19), or to blame them for the vitriolic reviews of books like *Walden Two* (1948/1962) and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971) (see Bjork, 1993; Dinsmoor, 1992). I suspect that it is the message more than the medium: A scientific treatment of human behavior may be anathema to the adherents of a more anthropolatric *Weltanschauung*.

Ironically enough, Richelle may well find himself tarred with the same brush, becoming the target of accusations that he is too zealous an advocate. I fear that he, too, may have a difficult time dissociating himself from the charge of "orthodoxy." On most issues, he is strongly supportive of Skinner's point of view, vigorously defending him against what he considers to be unfair criticisms. To take one example, he questions the intellectual integrity of Chomsky's attack on Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1957) (pp. 7 and 121). To do this is to break the conventions of academic discourse. Beware, Dr. Richelle, of the dangers of becoming overly partisan!

Cognitive Psychology

I found Richelle's discussion of cognitive psychology (chap. 9) quite congenial with my own thinking. He does an effective job of bringing out the extreme variation in outlook and opinion that may be found behind the same marquee, ranging from some approaches that I find quite respectable scientifically to others that are so naive as to be difficult to distinguish

from a lay point of view (cf. Dinsmoor, 1986). He distinguishes four categories, which seem to me to function more as a device for highlighting major trends within the cognitive community than as a true classificatory scheme, with mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. Institutional cognitivism, as Richelle calls it, merely emphasizes a restricted part of the content of psychology, concentrating on the rational processes by which "knowledge" is acquired and implemented and ignoring the emotional and motivational processes that have traditionally served as the special province of our discipline. This separation of cognition from the rest of psychology, Richelle suggests, is leading to a further separation between academic research personnel, as represented in the American Psychological Society (and the Psychonomic Society, I might add), and clinical and other practitioners, who place a much greater emphasis on the irrational and unconscious processes that affect our behavior. Some of those whom Richelle describes as methodological cognitivists simply use the computer as a tool—the original engine driving the popularity of this approach—and as a model for a set of intervening variables, à la Hull or Tolman. Some of these people cannot be faulted as legitimate scientists. But they provide a protective cover or cloak, I would suggest, for other psychologists who are much more naive in their thinking. Epistemological cognitivists relegate behavior to the status of mere clues to the mystery of mental activity rather than a subject matter meriting attention in its own right. This, of course, represents a significant retreat from even the earliest, most primitive forms of behaviorism. Ethical cognitivists, as Richelle calls them, go even further, adopting the conceptual system of the lay person, as passed along by the early computer scientists, who had no contact, after all, with historical discussions of how to construct legitimate psychological theory.

Verbal Behavior

In chapter 10, Richelle presents an illuminating synopsis of the differences be-

tween the functional analysis of verbal behavior proposed by Skinner (1957) and the formal analysis of language proposed by Chomsky (1959). From the beginning, the two approaches had different objectives. Skinner's goal was to interpret concrete utterances, oral or written; Chomsky's was to determine what was grammatically acceptable. Skinner based his interpretations on the principles of behavior derived from the study of rats and pigeons in the conditioning laboratory. Chomsky ridiculed the idea that concepts that simple could cope with the complexities of human verbalization. He made no attempt to relate the rules of grammar to any more general set of principles but instead resorted to the postulation of an ad hoc mechanism, peculiar to the human species, that had precisely the properties necessary to generate the grammatical features possessed in common by different languages. Acceptable sentences (performance) were controlled by rules (linguistic competence) that were hard-wired into the nervous system. Because Chomsky's device was unobservable and had no consequences other than those it was summoned to explain, it was difficult to refute, but it was not good science. And it was not very useful.

As linguists began to study the acquisition of speech by young children, Richelle points out, they discovered that grammatical rules had limited relevance and that learning, not innate competence, was the important determinant. The conversational style used by adults throughout a variety of cultures to talk to their infants ("baby talk") reflects an implicit but nonetheless effective teaching procedure. This style is slower than normal speech, with frequent pauses. It is limited in vocabulary, highly redundant, and simpler in grammatical structure. And, in accord with the best of educational principles, it is constantly adjusted to the progress of the individual child.

Personally, I am not all that taken with Skinner's "nothing-different" treatment of the topic of thinking (why, then, the category?), summarized in chapter 11, but Richelle does come up with some insightful comments about the advantages of rule-governed behavior. Verbalized rules,

he notes, "are economical, . . . they allow for the safe acquisition of skills that would expose the learner to high, possibly fatal risk if in direct contact with the contingencies . . . [and] they are obviously the basis of the cumulative character of human culture" (p. 143). Also, "they make it possible to put present behavior under the control of remote consequences" (pp. 143–144).

Applications

Chapters 12 and 13 deal with Skinner's approach to two of the most important areas of application of behavioral principles: therapy and education. There will be few surprises here for people who are already conversant with Skinner's writings in these areas, but Richelle's account could have a salutary influence on those who are not. There is an interesting discussion on pages 161 and 162 of the relation between therapeutic endeavors and social controls. Richelle suggests that

Psychotherapies are compensating for negative controls exerted by other agencies. They are, in some way, inevitably subversive. . . . [But] those schools of psychotherapy that rely on the subject's internal resources and do not make controls explicit are especially exposed to being supported [i.e., co-opted] by the controlling agencies, the excesses of which have made them necessary. By emphasizing the individual's autonomy, they are in fact supporting the very controls they should, instead, expose. (p. 161)

Behavior analysts will welcome Richelle's emphasis on concepts transferred from the laboratory to the clinical situation, on the value of the within-individual research design, and on the definition of objectives in order to evaluate outcomes.

In his discussion of Skinner's contributions to education, Richelle describes and defends the principles of programmed instruction. He also brings out that, quite contrary to the specters of lockstep drill apparently conjured up for some readers by terms like "teaching machines" and "educational technology," Skinner's procedures adjust to the individual, freeing him or her to proceed at his or her own pace. In this respect, they are far more flexible than the standard-

ized lectures and drills of conventional group instruction. And now that the computer has become a common fixture in our schools, it becomes evident that Skinner's machines were never in reality threats to the teaching profession. Teachers are aided, not displaced, by this kind of device.

Social Views

In chapter 15, Richelle treats Skinner's best-selling book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971) as primarily a cultural history of the word "freedom" and a behavioral analysis of what the word means. "Movements for freedom . . . are in essence escape behaviors" (p. 204). The exhortatory literature that sprang up around those movements, however, did not limit the word to the elimination of aversive controls but exalted it as an abstract and almost metaphysical concept. Any control, of any kind, was deemed aversive. At this point, Richelle's argument becomes difficult for me to follow, but as I understand it, he believes that the banning of all recognized controls often has the paradoxical effect of allowing the surreptitious advance of less obvious factors, including new aversive controls (p. 205).

"Just as mentalism is the main obstacle to the progress of scientific analysis, so does it bar the way to any efficient solution to problems that mankind has to face today. Both aspects are, for Skinner, tightly linked together" (p. 206). The fiction of human autonomy ("free will") is a useful camouflage for those in power. Results imposed by naked force and by aversive control are not reliable, because these methods lead to reactions of escape and avoidance. If the punishing mechanisms can be transferred inside the subject, Richelle suggests, these negative reactions will not be directed toward those in authority. Giving the individual credit for successful behavior may seem like a supportive stratagem, but it carries with it the implication that the same individual is also responsible for the failures. The teacher, the therapist, or the government is absolved of any blame.

Richelle defends Skinner against the

charge of proposing a totalitarian system of governance. Although the Planners and the Mangers of Walden Two (chap. 14) were appointed, rather than elected, Richelle points out that their terms of office were limited and that they did not profit in any way from their position within the administrative hierarchy. Unlike a conventional ruling class, they had no mechanism for perpetuating their power and no incentive to do so. In this respect, it might be noted that even Frazier, the founder of the community, enjoyed no special status. Walden Two was truly a classless society.

Reappraisal?

There are any number of passages in the book that strike me as quite insightful, but whether they add up to a "reappraisal," as suggested in the subtitle, is open to question. Perhaps Richelle is contrasting his favorable evaluation of Skinner with some of the hostile comments he has quoted in the opening pages and elsewhere throughout the book. Certainly he is an able defender. However, comments like those cited do not constitute a coherent and intellectually responsible body of thought, requiring logical analysis and refutation, but rather are only a hasty and ill-informed fusillade, requiring little more than a repetition of what Skinner has already said. For the most part, what Richelle presents is a synopsis and a defense. For those readers already familiar with Skinner's writings, there are many interesting passages but no major surprises or revelations. For those who are being introduced to Skinner for the first time or who have been taken in by some of the splenetic rhetoric aimed in his direction, the book may prove to be quite illuminating.

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