

# **Francis Schaeffer and B.F. Skinner**

**by Donald Ratcliff**

The late Francis A. Schaeffer, a writer and evangelist has been an important influence among Christians for nearly twenty years. During the 1950's and 1960's, Schaeffer developed a unique ministry with youth, and soon become widely known for his intellectual approach to Christianity. He appreciated the fine arts, science, history and other areas of the liberal arts, but spoke often of the dangers of humanism found in much of the philosophy behind modern thought. Time magazine (1960) labeled his Swiss retreat a "mission to intellectuals," and many evangelicals appreciated his contrast of biblical faith with other world-views, demonstrating the superior qualities of a conservative, theistic perspective. His books, which at first were taken from his university lectures, became best sellers and his influence spread rapidly among evangelicals.

In the latter 1970's and 1980's he also became popular with certain fundamentalists (e.g. Jerry Falwell), perhaps due to his anti-abortion stand rather than his earlier intellectual writing. This led Newsweek to label him the "Guru at Fundamentalism" (Woodward, 1982). Nearly all of his books have recently been compiled in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer* (1985), while perhaps the best summary of his intellectual work is *How Should We Then Live?* (1976). Schaeffer's continuing influence can be seen in the release of several recent books about his ministry (Dennis, 1985, 1986; Ruegsegger, 1986; Parkhurst, 1985).

In his earlier work, Schaeffer critiqued the famous psychologist B. F. Skinner, one of the best known behaviorists of our century. Schaeffer briefly spoke of Skinner's thought in several books, although his most extensive treatment is found in *How Should We Then Live?* and an earlier booklet *Back to Freedom and Dignity*. His generally negative view of Skinner raises a number of questions which should be examined by anyone interested in the behavioral approach to the social sciences and the parallel philosophy of behaviorism.

## **Skinner's Concepts**

Psychologist B. F. Skinner has proposed three possible consequences of any behavior: reinforcements which are consequences which increase the likelihood of behavior (such as praise or food), punishments which tend to decrease behavior (such as a frown or a traffic ticket), and the lack of reinforcement or punishment which also tends to decrease behavior (such as no response to the punch line of a joke). He also holds that reinforcers can be learned (money becomes valuable because of its association with what is purchased) and that reinforcement need not follow every behavior to be effective (receiving a paycheck every two weeks).

Skinner assumes that all human behavior is ultimately due to the above influences, Sometimes the consequence occurred in the distant past, such as praise for tying shoes as a child resulting in continued tying of shoes into adulthood. Learning in the above ways is called “conditioning” and his entire system is often referred to as “behaviorism.”

Skinner assumes that society can be perfected by systematically using his principles, a concept he developed in his early novel *Walden Two* (1948). Further, he believes that the words “freedom,” “dignity,” and similar ideas may have once had a positive function, but with the fuller understanding of human nature they are now outmoded and meaningless. Quoting from his landmark book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, “To man [as] man we readily say good riddance” (Skinner 1971, p.191).

### **Problems Suggested by Schaeffer**

Francis Schaeffer (1976) describes several problems with Skinner’s views. First, “Skinner cannot live on the basis of his own system” (p. 229). His only value is biological continuity of the human species, a value that cannot be derived from Skinner’s system. Thus the system is not as complete as Skinner would have you think.

Second, there is no room for human nature, people are not uniquely distinct from animals, since we are only a “bundle of conditioning” (p. 229). Third, the determinism of Skinner’s psychology leaves no room for the desire to be autonomous; there can be no shaping of destiny if there is no freedom.

Schaeffer also points out that a result of the mechanistic approach of behaviorism is the tendency to treat others and the self as one would machines. With such a mechanistic view of humanity there is less resistance to manipulation. Due to the popularity and influence of prominent behaviorists, Schaeffer fears the widespread application of behaviorism will increase the authoritarianism of governmental bodies. Says Schaeffer (1976),” in Russia, political prisoners are put in mental wards to be reconditioned” (p. 239).

Finally, Schaeffer raises the question of who controls the controllers if behaviorism is applied society-wide. Without an adequate basis for morality (only found in the Bible), manipulation by authoritarian governments will destroy personal freedom.

### **Other Problems With Skinnerian Behaviorism**

Others such as Bufford (1981) and Cosgrove (1982) have noted additional difficulties in Skinner’s radical conclusions. For example, his early research used animals as subjects; the extent to which one can generalize such findings to humans is open to question.

Some have noted that the regular use of certain reinforcers may promote materialism, poor nutrition or overdependence upon external rewards (in contrast to inner satisfaction or values). In addition, Skinner's ideas assume a closed system, as does a great deal of recent scientific research.

Finally, Cosgrove (1982) notes that Skinner does not differentiate between the technology of behaviorism, based upon empirical data, and the philosophy of behaviorism. He believes in both, but one need not hold to the philosophy to accept and make use of scientific findings.

### **A Critique of Schaeffer's Analysis**

Like Skinner, Schaeffer does not clearly discriminate between the technology and philosophy of behaviorism. Schaeffer has stated Skinner's philosophy adequately, but implies that the technology is inherently manipulative. The technology of behaviorism is compatible with Christianity if the presupposition of an "open system" is substituted for the humanistic "closed system" assumption.

Schaeffer seems to equate Skinnerian and Russian conditioning. Actually conditioning psychology in the Soviet Union is predominantly based upon Pavlov's reflexive conditioning rather than the American operant conditioning of Skinner. Russian psychology makes little use of Skinner's idea of consequences of behavior (at least in their psychological theorizing).

The dangers of behaviorism described by Schaeffer imply that the technology is very effective; if it were not powerful it would not be dangerous. One does not become more effective as a Christian (even in Christian ministry), by excluding effective strategies merely because they can be dangerous if misused. With biblical presuppositions and ethical guidelines, behaviorism can be a valuable tool for Christians. [One of Schaeffer's letters, quoted by Winter (1986), states this latter conclusion regarding psychology in general, but not specifically about behaviorism.]

Schaeffer's fear of widespread application of Skinnerian" conditioning by authoritarian governments has considerable merit. Powerful tools in the wrong hands can result in terrible consequences. A number of psychologists, including many who are not Christians, have voiced similar concerns.

Schaeffer asks who controls the controllers. In response it can be asserted that control is ultimately reciprocal. Leaders certainly influence their followers, but followers can also influence their leaders. For example, a teacher using behavior modification to change her students is also influenced by the response of the students (she is more likely to use behavioral methods if she receives the reward of changed behavior!).

Schaeffer's comment regarding the inconsistency of any value, including human survival, with behavioral philosophy is well stated. His comments on the uniqueness of humanity as resulting from being made in the image of God, are particularly valuable.

### **The Value of Operant Conditioning**

A careful reading of Schaeffer indicates that he does not completely rule out the use of operant conditioning: "The Christian position is not that there is no element of conditioning in life, but rather that by no means does conditioning explain what people are in their totality" (Schaeffer, 1976, p. 229). Even the use of animal experiments to understand people is compatible with Schaeffer's views; he speaks of people being in some ways like animals (finite) and in other ways like God (personal) (Schaeffer, 1968). Behaviorism demonstrates the commonality of creation which produces the similarity between people and animals.

Clearly conditioning can influence a person by predisposing one to choose certain behaviors, yet free will and choice do exist and God can intervene in human affairs (Ratcliff, 1981), both of which are implied by Schaeffer's concept of an "open system." Influence, rather than strict determinism, is more consistent with what has been found by psychological experimentation; in the social sciences one rarely, if ever, finds a 1.00 correlation as is found in the natural sciences (Bufford, 1981).

Skinner's operant conditioning technology, as well as all other scientific truth, has been discovered in God's natural revelation. "All truth is God's truth," wherever it is found. Conditioning is not only found in natural revelation, but also in the Bible (e.g. heaven is the ultimate reward. Proverbs describes positive and negative consequences for specific behaviors).

If conditioning is used by Christians, choice should be recognized through informed consent and other ethical provisions. Perhaps one of the best ways of enhancing freedom of choice is to teach the principles of behavioral psychology: the more one understands behaviorism, the more one is able to resist the control by others.

Conditioning theory is clearly insufficient as a total explanation of human personality. Other psychological theories, in the context of Holy Scripture, may supplement Skinner's concepts to form a more complete view of human nature. The mechanistic side of behaviorism would thus be offset by other theoretical perspectives.

With personal freedom acknowledged and respected, operant conditioning theory can be a valuable aid for Christians. For many specific applications of behavioral psychology within a biblical framework see Bufford (1981) and Ratcliff (1978, 1981, 1982, 1983).

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