Another look at B.F. Skinner...

The nature of man has long been a crucial topic for legal, philosophical, religious, and political speculation. Debate on the point has centered on the existence of some of history's greatest thinkers; the arguments proposed have been among the most asthetically accomplished of man. Some of the proposals have been enshrined among the world's most popular religions or hallowed as the foundation of a system of law enduring for centuries.

Much of the past 2,000 years of such thought has been characterized by a belief in some sort of "inner man," charged with the responsibility for directing the body and either blessed with a free and autonomous will or cursed by shackles to some outside force. The scientific revolution, however, has encouraged a rather different perspective of the nature of man, and B.F. Skinner's Beyond Freedom and Dignity is one of the more well-known popularizations of some of the attitudes involved.

Much of Skinner's approach owes its basis to the pragmatist doctrines of William James introduced to philosophy and psychology near the turn of this century. Pragmatism proceeds from the assumption that there are no givens, that physical evidence proves the existence of abstract theories providing the justification for physical events. A pragmatist, therefore, determines the extent his own achievement--is at least to some extent his own accomplishment. And the key to avoiding abuses is to ensure that this reciprocity remains a dominant factor. But he offers no way to be certain that this counter-control will be preserved. Or Skinner argues that man's individuality will be continued by his participation in the re-design of the new human. "Man himself may be controlled--or self-controlled, or not controlled--by his environment, but it is an environment which is almost wholly of his own choosing." Somewhere in the middle of his presentation the distinction between the individual and the collective man is lost, and Skinner has done little to comfort those who fear a future of robots.

The discussion about culture tends to a consideration of the nature of man himself. It seems to come closest to the conclusion of the book. The question of the existence of scientific evidence for his approach, leaving his detractors to insist that nothing has been proved. The book was intended, no doubt, to reach a non-scientific audience, but Skinner might have done a little bit better than appeal to experiments with pigeons or guinea at the results of swapping control children with the brains of English nobility.

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To these detractors Skinner's answers are not at all convincing. There is a certain reciprocality that exists in the relationship between the controller and the controlled in any circumstance, he notes, and the key to avoiding abuses is to ensure that this reciprocity remains a dominant factor. But he offers no way to be certain that this counter-control will be preserved. Or Skinner argues that man's individuality will be continued by his participation in the re-design of the new human. "Man himself may be controlled--or self-controlled, or not controlled--by his environment, but it is an environment which is almost wholly of his own choosing." Somewhere in the middle of his presentation the distinction between the individual and the collective man is lost, and Skinner has done little to comfort those who fear a future of robots.

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If you are willing to accept Skinner's musings about the existence of scientific evidence for his approach, leaving his detractors to insist that nothing has been proved. The book was intended, no doubt, to reach a non-scientific audience, but Skinner might have done a little bit better than appeal to experiments with pigeons or guinea at the results of swapping control children with the brains of English nobility.

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Beyond Freedom and Dignity is not a book that will convert libertarians or attract many followers from the camps of the undecided, but it is a useful introduction to the behavioralist approach and exposes, Maryann Monroe says, "the job before Skinner's predecessors of doom materializes..."

Available at the Tech Coop

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