

Summa Contra Skinner

The Pseudo-Science of B. F. Skinner,
by Tibor R. Machan, *New Rochelle,*
N. Y.: Arlington House Publishers,
1974. 224 pp. \$9.95.

B. F. SKINNER'S NAME leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many who find it difficult to deal with his doctrines dispassionately. It is very much to the credit of Professor Machan, then, that he manages for the most part to preserve an air of neutrality throughout this critique of Skinner's doctrines. This is especially so since Machan, above all else, wants to rescue the concepts of freedom and dignity from the dungheap of Skinnerian reductionism.

With considerable care Machan shows that Skinner's claims of scientific precision and exactitude are wildly exaggerated. Indeed, "Skinner is proposing a theory of science and a theory of man, not in his capacity as a scientist but in his rôle as an intellectual layman who has inherited a certain view of science." As a result, "we must understand that the Skinnerian announcement

of faithfulness to science and dependence on scientific method is highly specious and unsubstantiated."

The two major systematic shortcomings of Skinner's pseudoscience, according to Machan, are (1) the unquestioned commitment to the model of physics as a paradigm of all knowledge, and (2) the occurrence of the "blow-up fallacy—taking the picture of sculptors and clay, or trainers and pigeons, and imposing it on an entirely different relationship, namely, human beings vis-à-vis other human beings." The first shortcoming results in "a drastic category mistake—confusing different sorts of problems, conflating areas that do not belong together." This same idea is expressed later by Machan when he admits of Skinner that "in some circumstances his methods are helpful." He cautions us, however, that "what is not to be confused with a partial defense of Skinnerism (and behaviorism) is full regard for it as a world-view by which to make sense of human affairs *in toto*." The second major shortcoming of Skinnerian behaviorism "involves a logical error in jumping from conclusions about rats, pigeons, chimps, or porpoises to people." One is reminded here of Konrad Lorenz's leap from his studies of geese to conclusions about man's aggressive "instincts."

Machan's critique is particularly telling with respect to Skinner's insistence upon reducing human behavior to "operational analysis of mentalistic terms." In a word, Skinner's notion of "operant conditioning" is simplistic in that

Skinner wants to show that everything we do, even our selection of goals, aims, and purposes, is caused by the environment. But since he cannot explain the *first phase* of operant behavior, he fails at his task significantly.

Machan aptly points out that Skinner cannot account for what Alburey Castell once called "agency," which is the stubborn fact that human beings *initiate* action and are not simply passive, as Skinner would have

us believe. As Machan puts it, "Skinner's schema fails to make sense of *human* behavior as such."

One of the most interesting chapters in Machan's book deals with Skinner's claim that "survival is the only value according to which a culture is eventually to be judged, and any practice that furthers survival has survival value by definition" (quoting Skinner). This claim leads to social engineering, which is nothing more or less than the manipulation of culture by Skinnerian "experts." As Machan puts it, "Skinner has endeavored to give scientific justification for the claim that *he and his colleagues ought to run the culture* and everyone's life within it so that the culture will survive." It is this claim, perhaps more than any other, that bothers critics of Skinner. Machan is no exception, especially since it is this sort of control that leads to the eradication of human freedom and dignity. This concern leads Professor Machan, in the second part of his book, to outline an alternative, libertarian position that is designed to restore freedom and dignity to the center of moral, social, and political inquiry.

The addition of a positive alternative to Skinnerism saves this book from the charge of being excessively critical. It is, on the whole, an attractive and thought provoking defense of human rights which are defined as "*the* social conditions that when established *can/will* (and do) enable people to go about the business of living a good life."

While I can readily accept most of Machan's critique and stated alternatives, it seems to me that he overemphasizes his concern with the individual when he insists that the classical doctrine of "the common—or public—good" means what does "actually serve *every* person in the human community" (emphasis mine). Since it is, practically speaking, impossible to find any policy that is in the common good on this view, the notion becomes a useless fiction. This is simply a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water. It is one thing to emphasize the primacy of the individual

as against the social whole; it is quite another thing to argue that it is only the individual that counts. The concern of many political theorists has been with the common good as determined by the majority and this has been a fruitful and important part of classical democratic theory. Machan does not accept this view, however. He is (excessively) concerned that some people (the majority) will "foist their wishes on those who are either alone or enjoy smaller numbers." In order to see the need for caution at this point, one need only recall that Robert Paul Wolff employs the rejection of majority rule as a basic ploy in his "defense" of anarchism. Machan asks: "why is [the argument from the will of the majority] any justification at all" for the imposition of one will upon another? The answer, of course, lies in a careful examination of the social contract theory according to which each of us freely consents to majority rule. Philosophers like Joseph Tussman have persuasively argued that the social contract theory is not only relevant to current political discussions, but fundamental to such distinctions as, say, the one between power and authority.

A preoccupation with human rights can and does lead to an ignoring of human responsibility. One can be suspicious of the Skinnerian reduction of "the common good" to mere survival of the culture, as well as the demands made upon the individual in the name of "the public interest" or "national security," without insisting that such demands are never legitimate and the notion of the common good a bogus concept. It strikes me that this is a serious shortcoming of Machan's libertarian view.

On balance, however, Machan's thesis and critique are quite compelling. This is an important book that should receive the careful and respectful attention of all serious students of the contemporary scene, especially since ours is an age whose vision is blurred—conditioned as it has been by Skinnerian "science" and scientolism generally.

Reviewed by HUGH MERCER CURTLER