

Beyond the Punitive Society

Operant Conditioning: Social and Political Aspects

Edited by HARVEY WHEELER (1973)

London: Wildwood House. Pp. vii+274. £1.60.

Skinner would surely go to the stake with his convictions intact, like Bruno, rather than tone down his message under pressure, as Galileo did. Ironically, Skinner's message is that neither convictions nor verbal mannerisms are 'our own' but belong to the environment, having been formed by previous learning and conditioning. However, there are rewards on earth for persistently maintaining an oversimplified idea that goes against the grain sufficiently to arouse critics. One of them is the attention of the formidable battery of intellects (British readers will recognize Arnold Toynbee, Alexander Comfort and Ritchie Calder among 18 others) who contributed to this symposium, which was commissioned by the "Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions" of California. The purpose was to produce an assessment of operant conditioning as a social technology, and views were sought of philosophers, biologists, physicists, and theologians, as well as psychologists (Pribram and Jensen along with Skinner himself). Economists, advertisers and jurists are notable by their absence, which is extremely odd and a great pity since, although advertisers probably know as much psychology as is good for them, the others, the current elite of 'controllers', surely need all the help they can get.

The philosophers think very little of Skinner (it is the Skinner of 'Freedom and Dignity' of course who is examined, not operant conditioning per se), but some theologians are apparently pleased to see a recurrence of Thomist views on individual responsibility, with 'endowment' and 'environment' taking over from Providence and Grace. The degree of acceptance of Skinner's social ideas ranges from nil (Karl Pribram and Max Black) to Comfort's '90% likelihood' prophecy that we shall have

'operant-conditioning-anarcho-social' political structures in fifty years.

All the contributors have thoroughly absorbed what Skinner has to say, irrespective of their endorsement or criticism of it. The chapters are short, self-contained, and in conversational style. A compact and competent introduction to behaviour modification and operant conditioning by J.R. Platt is included. This book therefore has much to recommend it as reading for a 'wider issue in psychology' type of audience. I can't think of any exams for which it would be much good as preparation, but that's a reflection on the exams, not the book. The symposium would be equally suitable as a guide to criticisms of Skinner, or as an introduction to the idea of Skinnerian cultural design. However, the theme is philosophical rather than practical - no one on either side mentions a new policy or scheme. But at only 1.60 tokens, it's excellent value.

STEVE WALKER