

Skinner and Aquinas

Michael Novak

A remarkable number of Christian theologians are, perhaps surprisingly, praising B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. A number of others believe his work incompatible with Christianity. Both may be wrong.

Professor Skinner would be the last person to claim autonomous credit for *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. It was not he, it was the environment that controlled the book's coming into being. And if we suppose that Skinner is a latter-day Thomas Aquinas, we might well imagine on his lips the echoes of an ancient outlook: "It was not owing to anything in me; everything was gift. Yet, I set hand to paper, but only through God's grace sweetly disposing all things. . . ." We recall the countless unsigned medieval masterpieces, the anonymous achievements of Chartres and that now lost social and cultural sense which did not attach much significance to which individual it was who expressed best the artistic genius of the age. It was enough, in those days, that the people, the culture, flowered. So imagining, so remembering, we recover more fully the shock of the sudden birth of ego: the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Age of the Individual.

If we suppose, with Whitehead, that science flourished in the West because of centuries of habituation in the confidence that every single historical phenomenon springs from one intelligible source—no lily blooms, no sparrow falls, no hair on a single head is lost, save God knows of it—then we may trace a fairly direct line from the Logos that is identified with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the Logos of whom Freud wrote so affectionately in *The Future of an Illusion*: that Logos no longer

personal, no longer God, but effectively exhibiting interconnectedness even in slips of the tongue, in dreams, in seemingly "irrational" aspects of behavior of all sorts.

We may say (with roughness appropriate to brevity) that from belief in a single intelligent Creator of all things were spawned inseparable twins. The first was confidence in the autonomy of every individual will (which Kant identified as the essence of Enlightenment) and the second, confidence in the rational, experimental procedures of scientific methods. And we may say, further, that as the children rebelled from the parent, so now with Skinner the second twin devours the first. Skinner demythologizes autonomy, the individual, freedom, dignity, in conscious parody of an earlier demythologizing of the Creator and Redeemer. As God died, so now must the autonomous individual. It is not surprising that the reaction against his work is religious in its intensity.

But why on earth would theologians see merit in what Skinner is up to? There are at least three reasons. I would like to analyze them; to raise questions about problems of translation from a Christian to a Skinnerian worldview; and to raise some political and institutional issues.

There is a widespread belief in this Protestant nation that Christianity is a religion of individualism, each man his own priest and pope, each conscience inviolable, each person a potential source of autonomy and dissent. "The Protestant principle," Paul Tillich was wont to boast, lies at the heart of the modern period, and it overlaps with the principle of the Enlightenment—it is the principle of the free, autonomous conscience. What Christianity adds to Enlightenment is chiefly the conviction that human autonomy is God's presence in man: whoever acts autonomously is acted in by God. Theologians influenced by Heidegger and the existentialists "demythologized" the New Testament, to show that what

MICHAEL NOVAK, a *Worldview* Contributing Editor, is Consultant for the Humanities at The Rockefeller Foundation. This article has been adapted from his contribution to *Beyond the Primitive Society*, ed. by Harvey Wheeler (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman).

Jesus demanded was authenticity, engagement, decisive acts: an exercise of genuine autonomy.

Not only classical theologians, also broad popular movements in American Christianity stress the importance of the individual and his "decision." The New England Puritans and the Southern and Southwestern populists have been at one in their fierce attachment to categories and rhetorical devices that accent the individual. (One of the bitter lessons that Catholic immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe had to learn in order to be "Americanized" was to pursue loneliness and *laissez-faire*: "You're on your own," "It's up to you," "Each man for himself"—a rhetoric, and some little reality, of individual opportunity, dissolving such native social solidarity as their families once had known.)

Three critical factors tell against the model of Christianity as individualism: the teachings of the Scriptures; the practice of early Christianity; and the actualities of Christian life. The reaction against an exaggerated and errant, although in some ways helpful, emphasis on individualism has been well under way for several decades. It culminated, for example, in "the Social Gospel"; in the Constitution on the Church agreed upon by the Second Vatican Council; in many initiatives of the World Council of Churches; in ecumenism; in liturgical revivals; and in the acquisition of social modes of thinking on the part of individual theologians. Reinhold Niebuhr's career, for example, may be viewed as a struggle to break free from merely individualistic categories to a larger, social conception of man. From his early books like *Moral Man and Immoral Society* to *Man's Nature and His Communities* is in this respect a very long voyage. And surely nothing is more obvious to the sociologically tutored eye than the social character of actual religious attitudes and practices today. Professor Skinner's emphasis upon the social character of human existence thus confirms, from a theological point of view, a well-established trend.

A second reason why many theologians find Skinner's position congenial concerns Christian images of Providence and grace. To speak merely from a Thomist standpoint (most thoroughly elucidated by Bernard Lonergan in *Grace and Freedom*), nothing of good that a human does is deserving of credit; everything is grace. (The damnable thing about Aquinas, Chesterton once observed, is that he leaves nothing for a man to boast of.) Man's freedom, in this view, is thoroughly conditioned: (a) No one chooses his parents, economic situation, childhood setting, nation of origin or historical era. (b) No one chooses his natural (we would say, genetic) endowment. (c) No one chooses the networks of circumstance in which he finds himself, or the laws or contingencies governing their behavior. (d) No one

chooses even the insights, aspirations or inspirations that emerge in consciousness.

Aquinas notes that one can resist or "turn away" from creative inner lights and urgings, given by grace or graced nature, for the world still belongs to "the father of lies." He defines sin as *aversio*—a turning away from those possibilities that attract one toward self-realization in total knowing and total loving, a turning away ultimately (in his eyes) from God. Thus, to be good is to align oneself with creative, life-giving tendencies; to be evil is to subtract oneself from them consciously and willingly.

All humans can take "credit" for *aversio*. When they promote community, increase understanding and intellect, develop their talents, achieve authenticity and *caritas*, all this has been sweetly disposed on their behalf by God through—striking linguistic echo—"operant grace." When other conditions enable them to do so, but they (from past habit or inclination) turn away, *they* are responsible—they prefer familiar reinforcers to more difficult, weaker ones. Their "sin," of course, is not merely personal; the entire social order is flawed and damaging to all. At no historical time was the cultural tissue of human life solely supportive of humane, creative acts; the "sin" is original, the sickness—the plague—inescapable.

Professor Skinner would perhaps find this one-way relationship to reinforcers unfair: no credit if you do, damned if you don't. But there is at least a certain plausibility in the notion that the reinforcers of the spirit are weak—they are not, for example, tangible, immediate or sensually competitive. And, interestingly enough, in the medieval imagination "blame" is slight for those to whom the reinforcements of the flesh are stronger than those of charity, but severe for those guilty of "spiritual pride"—an exaggerated notion of their own autonomy and importance.

In this respect, the Aquinian human is, like the Skinnerian human, entirely conditioned. Far from depriving the individual of liberty, however, these cumulative networks of antecedent conditions (for Aquinas) *enable* him—and, in particular, enable him to gain insight or to avert his "eyes" ("to sin against the light"), enable him to extend himself to others or to withdraw. The range of man's possibilities include loving his neighbor (acting truly toward him) and murdering him.

Skinner is aware of the parallelism between his theoretical construct and those of ancient arguments about predestination, grace, faith, works, free will. One can imagine him, indeed, as rebelling in a fairly systematic way, first, from the dominance of a Calvinist view of the world and then, secondly, from an Enlightenment-Individualist's view of the world. Against Calvinism he wants to eliminate the "magic" of appeal to unseen and unverifiable actions by an autonomous self. He writes, for exam-

ple, that "Being good to someone for no reason at all, treating him affectionately whether he is good or bad, does have Biblical support: grace must not be contingent upon works or it is no longer grace. But there are behavioral processes to be taken into account."

At such points, the intellectual structure of Skinner's worldview—with God left out—is rather more like that of Aquinas than like that of Luther or Calvin. For Aquinas grace operates (except in rarest cases) through the ordinary contingencies and processes of nature, through "secondary causes"—there are always "behavioral processes to be taken into account." The whole environment, the whole "schedule of contingencies" which constitutes history, is graced. (Skinner merely believes it to be melioristic.) Simply by being what it is, it manifests God's presence, slowly building brotherliness and tutoring humans through suffering, irrationality and pain. Were Skinner God, the design of the universe would, no doubt, be less faulty, less wasteful, more economical. But it would operate no less through "secondary causes."

What I want most emphatically to stress is that Skinner's sense of reality, the story he believes the universe to be living out (he calls his view "the scientific picture"), reaches back in time to make contact with a more ancient vision. It is as if the Enlightenment were, not in its political gains but in its philosophical "picture," a temporary aberration—a necessary stage, perhaps, but a magnificent exaggeration.

Science has probably never demanded [Skinner concludes his book] a more sweeping change in the traditional [let us rather say "recent"] way of thinking about a subject, nor has there ever been a more important subject. In the traditional picture a person perceives the world around him, selects features to be perceived, discriminates among them, judges them good or bad, changes them to make them better (or, if he is careless, worse), and may be held responsible for his action and justly rewarded or punished for its consequences. In the scientific picture a person is a member of a species shaped by evolutionary contingencies of survival, displaying behavioral processes which bring him under the control of the environment in which he lives, and largely under the control of a social environment which he and millions of others like him have constructed and maintained during the evolution of a culture. The direction of the controlling relation is reversed: a person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him.

Once it was the Leibnizian *monad* that gave primary shape to Western liberal perception: The whole world was viewed through the lens of the atomic

individual. Now the metaphor "spaceship Earth" directs our perception to our common dilemmas, our common fate, our common interconnectedness. Each human is implicated in the racism, poverty, pollution and other diseases of his world. We are entering an era in which we recognize that for the individual there is no escape from the species, no breaking through the tissues of a common environment, no uninvolved, impermeable, unimplicated self. There is no place to hide. This social and communal awareness is not uncongenial to Christianity.

But the third theme that Christians may find attractive in Skinner's work is his emphasis on earthy, bodily, environmental supports. Christianity is an incarnational religion. The dominant symbol through which it shapes perception is that God does not appear as God (pure, dazzling, overpowering, inescapable) but as flesh. The godly way is not by way of escape from flesh, but through the flesh. Hence, there are sacraments, church buildings, bells, incense, music, paintings, processions, dramatic representations; there are holy days, ashes, external acts of penance, purple vestments for penance and white for days of joy; at prayer one kneels or faces eastward or extends the arms. . . . Monastic life, for example, is full of "reinforcers," designed so that one begins the practices even before one has the appropriate feelings—and, indeed, the feelings are held by some masters of the "interior" life to be irrelevant. *The Dark Night of the Soul* is a journey past feelings, memories, images and other accustomed reinforcers. In a powerful way the wisdom of the Benedictines who have successfully been building and multiplying utopian communities since the sixth century—is a sort of Skinnerianism in advance. *Ora et Labora*: Neither prayer nor labor is the act solely of some autonomous self but of an embodied social animal. Work in the fields is social, and so is the chanting of the liturgy. And, ironically, this high social emphasis on "reinforcers" produces not uniformity but a highly developed individuality, as anyone who has known the angularity of individual Benedictines can attest.

Why, then, does the actual conduct of Skinner's argument make many uneasy? For one thing, the images and symbols of science no longer sound salvific. God has died (it is said), the individual has died (Skinner says), but science, too, has died; it has lost its purity and its credibility. What the Church is to Christianity, technology is to science, and by their fruits both have been harshly judged. The appeal that the cure for *bad* design is *good* design is on a homiletic par with the claim that "the only thing wrong with Christianity is that men have never tried it."

Again, never has the behavior of a younger generation been so thoroughly studied and controlled as during the past fifteen years in the United States.

Never has American education been so thoroughly designed by experts. And now there is an almost universal revulsion against experts, controls and scientific designing. The spokesmen for "progress" have led us into pollution. The actual practice of technology has made of science a revolting, plastic cheapness. Thus a scientist who has trained pigeons and rats, and even had some success (through his disciples) with retardates, alcoholics, prisoners and the mentally ill, can hardly expect a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. There is more than a faint sense that "we have heard all this before."

Thirdly, Professor Skinner miscalculated enormously by employing words, images and symbols which—despite his explicit disclaimers and despite his own noble intentions—called to mind Hitler's scientists, Goebbels's techniques of information control, Chinese brainwashing, Stalinist "confessions," American police "crowd control" and other memories too fresh not to be enflamed. The central symbol of his book—the word "control"—is a specimen of aversive conditioning. It is not a reinforcer apt to draw converts through beauty and attractiveness. One who would give us a science of behavior, and yet not recognize the symbolic weight of his own language, diminishes our confidence in his leadership.

One source of misunderstanding, therefore, lies in the aversive symbolic reverberations given off by words which Professor Skinner finds so attractive: control, technology, progress, experts, perceptions tutored by work in the laboratory, etc. Common, ordinary experiences of daily life suggest to many of us that the more the new technologies multiply among us—autos, TVs, assembly lines—the more sloppy and unreliable grows the craftsmanship around us. New clothes come apart at the seams, machines constantly malfunction, fewer and fewer people seem to love what they are doing. These tangible experiences provide for many the context in which many listen to the new cry of salvation through behavior control. Naturally, Skinner's disciples will do better, learning from previous mistakes. . . .

In the interim, a second misunderstanding surrounds the other favorite Skinnerian word. Professor

Skinner's use of the word "environment" is as sweeping as his use of the word "control." He seems to include under its very large umbrella *any* variable that may influence behavior. Thus the entire universe is my environment; so is the more narrow ecosystem of Earth; so are my geographical surroundings here and now, and the lamp over my desk; so are ballpoint pen, paper and newsprint; so is the history of my cultural community until now, my family history, my personal memory and the traces upon my organism of every past experience; so are those others whose views and values are significant to me, as well as my opponents, imaginary and real; so is the language I speak; so are the ideals, images and symbols that move me. "Environment" is a very large name for my benefactor, indeed.

Some gain in conceptual precision is made if we notice that, whatever the variables of human behavior are, some are weightier than others. The state of the weather may "control" some decisions of mine at some times; at other times it may count hardly at all. Opposition from professional scholars may at times lead me to abandon an hypothesis; at other times, even without the support of a single other, I may obstinately, but conscientiously, hold firm. At one time a loaded pistol may move me as a convincing "persuader"; at another not even a pistol can "control" me. Is it possible, then, that once an ideal is deeply accepted we can resist other features of the environment unto death? On one occasion a rational argument may lead me to a sweeping change of mind; on another, even though defeated in argument, I continue to think my position correct and only my defense faulty. If "environment" covers every such feature, what light does it shed?

If Skinner did not claim so much for his technology of behavior, we might be willing to concede him more. So complex is "environment," so variable are the "controls," that in assenting to the fundamental Skinnerian principle that environment controls behavior we do not know—in a quite literal sense—what we are agreeing to. Whatever the preliminary successes in elementary, rudimentary behavior, the fascinating complications of human behavior—not yet exhausted even in song and fiction—have hardly yet been addressed by science. Shall a science of behavior arrive before the Parousia?