

B.F. SKINNER, HERO OF HIGHSCHOOL SCIENCE:

A Comment on Public Education

in a Pluralistic Culture -----

Elliott #1742

A half century ago (1933) I was a minuscule hero in highschool science: president of the science club in a large suburban highschool. It takes one to know one, and I was (as was B.F.S. a bit before me) a technocrat, believing that science sooner or later could and would solve all problems and deliver from all agonies--in short, be savior. *This was then explicitly, and is now more implicitly than explicitly, taught in American highschool science departments. This thinksheet takes one product, B.F.S., to point up some consequences for our culture and civilization.* (For an explanation and critique of this form of religion, see Way #7 in Fred. Streng et al, WAYS OF BEING RELIGIOUS, Prentice-Hall.) At age 79, B.F.S. has seen into print the 3rd and last vol.--A MATTER OF CONSEQUENCES (Knopf/83)--of his autobiography. Quotes here are from the Sept/83 feature article of PSYCOLOGY TODAY.

1. S. roots his life-direction in his experience of highschool science, which taught him experimentalism (which he developed into his own brand of behaviorism) and agnosticism (vis-a-vis the spiritual tradition of the West). His sophomoric-aggressive disdain for Bible/God/Church is still highschoolscienceish, a pathetic instance of arrested development of spirit. (Another self-victim of this arrogance parading itself as humility came to me for a first counseling session last evening: an airline pilot who, in deep depression, feared he might not be able to get out of bed this morning, to say nothing of piloting. Agnostic, spiritually hollow, highschool stultified in spiritual development, with college reinforcement of his existential vacuum and anxiety.)

2. The experimental method is the fundamental action of science, but experimentalism makes a religion of the method by denying any other knowledge-source--an instance of the "nothing but" fallacy. "In my high-school science" (32f), says he, I learned that "By its very nature an experimental analysis of behavior spawns a technology, because it points to conditions which can be changed to change behavior. I said as much in...WALDEN TWO." He learned that the point of a radish is to make radish seeds: "A radish is the way in which radish genes make more radish genes." So (his logical extension) "an individual is only* the way in which a species and a culture produce more of species and a culture....The question is whether we have reached the point at which we can accept a scientific view of human behavior and use it to solve our problems." (Fortunately for him, he lives in a culture unlike the one his view would produce: ours is a culture which, at least in certain universities--in this case, Harv.--more than tolerates eccentric "individuals" such as S. It's ironic that, for developing and promoting his notions, he's needed a type of culture his notions would eliminate.) This is only one of the self-contradictions in the thinking of this radical American biophilosopher.) (*Another instance of the nothing-but, reductionistic fallacy.)

3. Persons (despite S.) are unpredictable; sciences deals with predictables; therefore, for science, persons do not exist. 32: "If I am right about human behavior, I have written the autobiography of a nonperson." But the person is the chief cultural product of the West, I say; and a product necessary to the very development of modern science! Cf., e.g., Langdon Gilkey, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH (Anchor), 202: Early civilizations, seeing the individual only as an instrument in the nature cycle (like S.'s radish), could not "affirm the unique, the personal, the historical," genuine process and progress (a notion essential, again, to the development of modern science). Evolution itself is (203) "a triumph of the historical categories of thought in the natural sciences." S. is an instance both of reductionism and of recidivism, and so is a darling of many highschool-scienceniks, who control through "teachers colleges" how science continues to be taught in American public schools. Little wonder the challenge, though anti-

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"I would change WALDEN TWO's education, which was John Dewey. I would provide programmed instruction and contingency management." And "WALDEN TWO had no criminals, no psychotics, no retardates--I would do something about them now." The pathos of this blind leader of the blind! Yet he has much to teach us because of his ideological monomania.

intellectual, from "scientific creationism."

4. It's a truism that artists anticipate the cultural future, and the later Yeats as early as 1920 (in his poem "The Second Coming") foresaw Christianity's being overwhelmed by a new primitivism: "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" (The going mythologies, including Christianity, did not provide enough vitality for his poetizing--so he invented one of his own.) S. is a smooth (sophisticated) beast. S.'s WALDEN TWO was the Bible of hippie "rough beasts" who in the 1960s used it to form communes whose destiny proved dismal--I visited a number of them and sadly observed their mishmash of naturism (not an intelligent naturalism) and unrealism (in roseate notions of individual and social human nature).

5. Bacon's NOVUM ORGANUM should be required reading for highschool graduation, for the same reason the Bible should: the two are root-books of our civilization. S. has only Bacon as sacred text, whose themes have been his life-guides: (1) "I have studied nature not books. Books must follow sciences, not sciences books." (2) "Nature to be commanded must be obeyed." (3) Science can plan and build a better world. S. follows his father as a Bacon, Enlightenment-Man, enthusiast.

6. Ironically, S. combines arrogance (implacable animosity toward any but radical behaviorists) with humility (tongue-in-cheek but real: as an individual he is a "nonperson" "beyond freedom and dignity," milieu-determined and so not taking credit for his accomplishments). 32: "By tracing what I have done to my environmental history rather than assigning it to a mysterious, creative process, I have relinquished all chances of being called a great thinker." To see that in this humility, however, he is more cynic than Stoic, compare the 1st chap. of M. Aurelius' MEDITATIONS: simply, purely, nobly, M.A. passes all credit for being emperor and philosopher back to ancestors and mentors.

7. And another irony: S. uses my chief PhD mentor, Amos Wilder, to reinforce his view of the only instrumental importance of the individual. 30: "Assigning one's achievements to one's genetic and environmental histories is an act of self-denial....I like to contrast it with the self-aggrandizement of those who claim to have been born in the image of God the Creator. Amos Wilder gave me some help with a related theme in the Gospels....L.17.33...: "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it," on which compare Schopenhauer's annihilation of the will "as the way to freedom" and Conrad's Secret Sharer "learning that true self-possession comes from self-abandonment." And it's strong in Eastern mysticism. I think it's "the central theme of a behavioral science."...S.'s cavalier treatment of Scripture to reinforce his opinions and prejudices is typical of a contempt mentality he had reinforced within him at Harvard (32): "I was associating with physiologists and biologists whose contempt for psychologists did not go unspoken." He never took a course in psychology, and his biblical ignorance is abysmal. Biblical religion is consistently against "self-aggrandizement," and its impulse is almost solely responsible for the appearance of the individual (as of history and of science)--far away from S.'s obliteration of the individual. I agree with S. against the non-biblical notion of the ultimate value and inherent dignity of the individual, but I hold that the individual is in God through Christ offered participation in God, who is ultimate Value and Dignity (qualities S. locates in the genetic-environmental process).

8. Religion in his background? 25: "My early religious experience was important. ...Much of my scientific position seems to have begun as Presbyterian theology, not too far removed from the Congregationalism of Jonathan Edwards." Predestination becomes genetic-environmental determinism. "I was taught to fear God, the police, and what people will think"--the divine, political, and social sanctions. No guilt or forgiveness, for his genes and history are responsible. But see how he'd rewrite WALDEN TWO (31): "more about the nitty-gritty conditions of incentive systems. I was counting on everybody being willing to give four hours a day in exchange for...living in the community. That's Marx," and it doesn't work. Too,