

## Open University Films

*Behavior Control: Freedom and Morality.* Open University Film Series. Color, 16mm, 25 min. \$275 purchase; \$20 rental.

So much gets presented in this half-hour discussion between B. F. Skinner and Geoffrey Warnock that it is hard to believe that it isn't an edited condensation of a much longer conversation. Skinner's views on the implications of behaviorism for morality and public policy are the subject of the discussion, and Godfrey Vesey, as very restrained moderator and introducer, and Warnock, as Skinner's interlocutor, lead Skinner with quite extraordinary gentleness and efficiency into casual but forthright avowals of many of the positions he has been *accused* of holding. Skinner's obliviousness to the garden path he is being led down is itself an important datum, in some ways the most telling information conveyed by this film. Those who have accused Skinner of being a devious and disingenuous champion of totalitarianism (a "crypto-fascist") are almost certainly wrong; those who have supposed that he is irremediably naive and unimaginative about ethical and social issues are almost certainly right. The film is rich in such information, not just in telling emphases in what Skinner says, but in arresting omissions, paths not taken, gambits declined, questions misunderstood. The seasoned student of Skinner's work, the frustrated critic who has tried to pin the obvious charges on Skinner and has had to deal with his maddeningly tangential ways of expressing himself in print, will find plenty of hypotheses confirmed here

(and confirmed more clearly here than anywhere in his writing), but for anyone less intimately acquainted with Skinner's views, most of this will go unnoticed and unappreciated. Several freshman students of mine who saw this film (and who claimed some acquaintance with Skinner's views) failed to see that anything at all of interest had been said, and gave it low marks on all counts. I think these same students, had they just studied Skinner and his critics in detail, would have found the film an engrossing supplement to their education.

The film's total ineffectiveness for my students was not surprising. There is no obvious or acrimonious disagreement, no real debate or conflict. Warnock, it seems, never lays a glove on the notorious Skinner. He mildly and deferentially asks Skinner a question, Skinner answers it forthrightly, and Warnock, with the meek smile of the instructed, changes the topic and asks another question. But what questions, and what answers! Warnock is the quintessence of the Oxford philosophy don. (Years from now grey-haired professors may want to drag this film out to show their students what an Oxford philosopher was really like.) No one can be more courtly, circumspect, stammeringly unassertive or gentle than an Oxford don. So gentle can he be that more than a few unsuspecting American professors have been cut to ribbons by one and never felt a thing. We now have such an incident on film, and Skinner's rendition of the role of the American is the equal of Warnock's don. (I can't recall if Skinner ever says "Gosh!" but he may well.) The entire scene is played with very little wasted motion. Particularly impressive in this apparently unrehearsed conversation is the presence of mind of all the participants. No one permits himself to be longwinded, and Warnock, especially, shows great restraint in declining an abundance of

cheap shots. The slightest eyebrow raise, or in one case a mug shot of a frown, and Warnock goes on to pursue the larger questions, conserving precious time for what is important.

The questioning begins on exactly the right note to my way of thinking: Skinner is asked if he thinks the *truth* of a behavioral or causal explanation of a bit of behavior entails the falsehood of the apparently competing mentalistic explanation of the same behavior. The example discussed is Skinner's having gone to the theatre the previous evening in London. If he went because, as he claims, going to the theatre in London in the past has been reinforcing for him (he has been reinforced—by delights, satisfactions, rewards—for behaving so) does this imply that he did not go *because he wanted to*, or *because he had framed a prior intention to go*? It is tempting to suppose that Skinner's central argument against "freedom and dignity" depends on a positive answer to this question, but Skinner misses the point of the question, fails to see that this is a crucial issue, and a crucial issue on which the vacillation in his writing is egregious. Eventually he is brought to acknowledge that people (unlike, say, plants that turn to the light) really do have prior intentions or purposes, but he says "You want to give some sort of dimension to these intentions. I'm worried by the dimensions of the thoughts." Then does Skinner presume all mentalistic or intentional talk to be dualistic, to imply the existence of ghostly immaterial somethings? Yes, he does, and when Warnock assures him that he is no dualist, Skinner professes relief and genially allows that not as much separates their positions as he had feared. Skinner even grants: "It would be unfair of me to attribute to you all the paraphernalia of mentalism [dualism?]" and goes on to explain that perhaps he overdoes his anti-mentalism, but for good reason: he is suspicious of

how much objectionable residue remains in Warnock's (or any cognitivist's) position.

Having obtained from Skinner this measure of how obsolete and naive his anti-mentalism is, Vesey and Warnock turn to Skinner's social proposals. Skinner obliges with the unequivocal assertion that *the survival of our culture* is "the value", the *summum bonum* of his ethics. This was what he seemed to be committed to in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, and he does not shrink from it here. Warnock responds by launching into an apparently innocuous historical observation. Thomas Hobbes, like Skinner, was a materialist, a believer in the possibility of conditioning the masses ("though he had no ideas as clear as yours about how this might be done") and a designer of political institutions. Yet he saw that the prospect of conditioning raised fundamental political problems. "Oh yes, it gets into controversy," Skinner agrees. "Survival [of a culture] is a very difficult value." But apparently the only difficulty Skinner sees is that *it is hard to predict* the vicissitudes that will be encountered, hard therefore to prescribe the behavior that will meet these and conquer them. "That's why there are different political philosophies," he says, and goes on to grant that although we can distinguish questions of technology from questions of the morality of technology's use, the philosopher "has no special expertise" for dealing with the latter, because presumably the only issue is prediction of vicissitudes and subsequent prescription of remedies. Skinner then enunciates what strikes me as a novel extension of one of his central themes: the whole issue of morality or ethics resides "in a spiritual world", and the upshot is that ethics itself (*any* sort of ethics beyond the rough-hewn pragmatic decisions of the behavioral engineer) is tainted by the ghosts of Cartesian dualism. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, it almost

seemed as if Skinner identified "autonomous man" with the ghost in the machine. So he did, we now learn.

This draws no protestations from Warnock, but rather a return to Hobbes, and to Hobbes' belief that the overriding value is survival of the individual, not the culture. A discussion ensues about the possibility of cultural evolution, and the central difficulties in Skinner's position emerge *seriatim*: one man's cultural change (to ensure survival) is another's cultural demise; the perpetuation of the race at the expense of cherished "rights" is not obviously to be preferred, and Skinner has no provision for setting limits or even priorities in this area. The tacit contrast between Hobbes' scientifically crude but philosophically subtle examination and Skinner's drastic underestimation of the difficulty of the problems answers Skinner's unconcealed contempt for philosophy more effectively (if more subtly) than protests or charges could have.

It would be both unfair and unsound to treat the extemporaneous and time-pressured remarks of any author as authoritative statements of his views, and in all likelihood Skinner, as most of us would, thought of all the things *he should have said* as soon as the cameras were turned off. But as indirect manifestations of his thinking, his remarks contribute a lot to the understanding of his views, and not always by tending to confirm our worst suspicions. At the end of the program he says, in summary characterization of his foray into philosophy and public policy, "If I have an idea of what should be done, I should use my behavioral engineering to convince you to go along." The naivete of this claim, while not exactly charming, puts Skinner in perspective: this is not Dr. Strangelove talking, but Tom Swift and his Electric Brainwasher. What could be sinister about a well-scrubbed brain?

— D. C. Dennett.