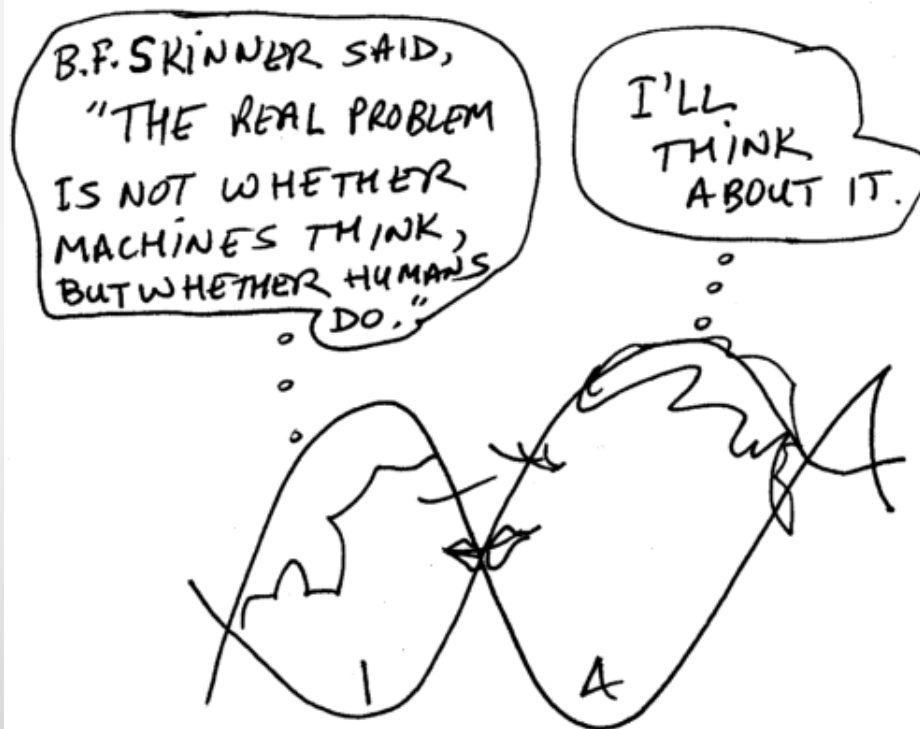


B.F. Skinner

Predicting Human Behavior

Liz Chapin



B.F. Skinner

- 1904-1990
- Hamilton alum!
- Behaviorist
 - Radical Behaviorism
- Skinner Boxes
 - Operant Conditioning



Air Cribs

- Easily cleaned
- Controlled for temperature and humidity
- Was intended to make babies more confident, comfortable, and healthy



Main Points

- Human behavior cannot be explained by thought
- Instead, it can be explained by environmental variables
- As a behaviorist, Skinner's theories discuss human behavior while deliberately avoiding reference to internal mental states

The Trouble with “Inner Causes”

- Skinner believes that our tendency to attribute internal causes to behavior is seriously flawed.
 - These internal events are difficult to observe.
 - Thus, we are likely to incorrectly attribute internal explanations to events.
 - We may even “invent” internal causes.
- Psychic Inner Causes
- Conceptual Inner Causes

Psychic Inner Causes

- “An even more common practice is to explain behavior in terms of an inner agent which lacks physical dimensions and is called “mental” or “psychic” (Skinner, 161).
 - For example, we blame a “disordered personality” for criminal behavior
- Even psychologists, Skinner marvels, use such a dualistic explanation of behavior.
 - For example, Freud’s ego, superego, and id
- Skinner argues that the mind cannot be directly observed in the way the nervous system can.
 - Example of a mathematician solving a problem.
 - May believe he knows “how he thinks.”
 - However, Skinner reasons that, as this mental event (like many) is unconscious, inferential, and therefore not a valid, observable explanation

Conceptual Inner Causes

- Skinner also makes the point that dualistic philosophers are redundant in their explanations.
 - Skinner reflects on the sentence "A man eats because he is hungry."
 - He reasons that this is a single set of facts: "He eats" and "He is Hungry."
 - Because of this single set of facts, there is no inner mental state causing the eating behavior.
- "Thus we are unprepared for the properties eventually to be discovered in the behavior itself and continue to look for something which may not exist" (Skinner, 162).



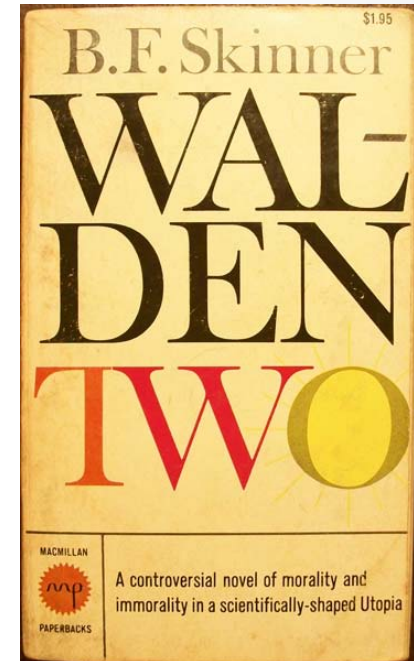
Skinner's Variables

- Skinner argues that it is the environmental variables that impact human behavior.
- He ask us to imagine bringing someone into a room and placing a glass of water in front of him.
 - Skinner wants to estimate the probability that he will drink.
 - We can be sure that he will or will not drink if the variables are altered. For example, if we were to force the man to engage in rigorous exercise, it is more probable that he will drink.
 - Other variables, Skinner points out, could impact the results (for example, fear of being poisoned).
 - These possible variables could not disprove the connection between the previously mentioned variables and observed behavior. Instead, they remind us how many variables must be taken into account.



Skinner's Vision

- “Eventually a science of the nervous system based on direct observation rather than inference will describe the neural states and events which immediately precede instances of behavior” (Skinner, 160).
- Walden Two



Problems with Behaviorism

- Skinner argues that the ability to analyze observable behavior scientifically justifies behaviorism
 - Can we analyze conscious thought?
 - Surely, if we could develop a method of scientifically analyzing internal mental states, Skinner's point would be irrelevant.
- Skinner argues that advances in neuroscience will not adequately explain behavior
 - However, aren't strides in neuroscience strengthening our ability to analyze and observe?

Discussion

- Do you agree with Descartes or Skinner?
- Can we accurately predict human behavior?
- Do we have free will?
- Can we measure or observe the inner, private mental state? If we can subject consciousness to a similar scientific analysis, is Skinner's argument defeated?