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PROG: A.303/9

PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY
A THIRD LEVEL ARTS COURSE

"Behaviour Control: Freedom and
Morality"

A discussion between B.F.Skinner,
Professor of Psychology, Harvard
and
Geoffrey Warnock, Principal Hertford
College, Oxford

Chaired by: Professor Godfrey Vesey,
Professor of Philosophy, The Open
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OPENING TITLES

- 1) PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY (black b/g)

- 2) (Question Mark Animation)

- 3) Behaviour Control
Freedom & Morality (black b/g)

- 4) A discussion between
B.F. Skinner
Professor of Psychology
Harvard University (black b/g)

Geoffrey Warnock
Principal
Hertford College, Oxford

- 5) Introduced by
Professor Godfrey Vesey (black b/g)

(The discussion follows and takes place in the front room of
Professor Geoffrey Warnocks residence at Hertford College)

A.303/9 Behaviour Control : Freedom and morality

Professor Vesey :

This Programme is about free will and determinism, but with a difference because one of the people in the programme hasn't just an academic interest in determinism: it is, so to speak, his job - he's a psychologist with a world-wide reputation for devising a technique of controlling behaviour known as 'operant conditioning' - though he has reservations about the word 'conditioning'. He is B. F. Skinner, Professor of Psychology at Harvard, and to talk to him about the pre-suppositions and morality of behaviour control is Geoffrey Warnock, who is an Oxford philosopher - in fact the Principal of Hertford College, Oxford.

Now I'd like to start things off by putting a question to both of you: it's this - Suppose somebody's way of behaving can be explained in terms of what you would call the contingencies of environmental reinforcement, but which is what I understand by rewards and punishments. Supposing you could explain his behaviour in that way - what about the explanation which the chap himself might give in terms of his ideas and his purposes and his thoughts and so on. Would the causal explanation show that other explanation to be a bogus one ?

Professor Skinner :

Yes - well could we take a specific example; last evening I went to the Theatre now why? Well I could tell you I felt like going, it occurred to me - the idea of going to the Theatre occurred to me and I went. I could also tell you that looking at it from my professional point of view that when I have gone to the Theatre in London I have always been richly re-inforced, that is to say things have happened which have increased the

likelihood that I will go to the Theatre when I'm in London, and this would be the explanation that I would give. And I would say that that explanation would also explain why the idea of going to the Theatre occurred to me and why I felt like going.

Professor Jamock :

That suggests to me that you're less sharply and unqualifiedly critical of the sort of everyday terms in which we habitually explain human behaviour than perhaps some of your readers might suppose.

Perhaps I might put the point like this : one's familiar from the history and science, or possibly pre-science (as one might call it) with the practice, at one time, of talking as if organisms, such as say plants did things for purposes - that they grew in a certain way in order to seek the sunlight. And you say in your book, and I'm sure most people would agree, that that way of talking really is wholly non-explanatory. I mean it involves talking as if plants have thoughts and intentions which they just don't, and one is genuinely explaining nothing. Now, I get the impression from what you were saying just now that you don't want to say exactly that anyway about the ordinary sort of story we would tell conversationally about why someone goes to the Theatre. It isn't ~~xx~~ that this is totally valueless, absolutely inapplicable kind of explanation but you think not just a complete one or doesn't tell one the whole story.

Professor Skinner :

Well there are two kinds of selection here. The plant turning to the light is a characteristic of plants which evolved because those plants gained an advantage and survived; there were contingencies of survival which selected those plants which turned most effectively to the light. The purpose which used to be put ahead of the turning

is now put afterward - it is the adaptation achieved by the plant in turning. The same thing is true in outward behaviour - what used to be thought of as creative, intentional act leading to behaviour is now seen to be due to the selective effect of the consequences in strengthening behaviour making it more probable, so that the purpose of going to the Theatre turns out to be the consequences of having gone to the Theatre in the past, rather than something which leads me to go in this particular instance.

Professor Warnock :

Yes but I suppose there's clearly no tendency in that towards the position that really intentions don't occur, or there are really no such things. One could reasonably say in the case of the sunflower that this just doesn't have any purposes at all. Whereas, of course, nothing in what you say, I think, would lead one to want to say that people don't actually have intentions in doing things - or don't intend to do something and then go ahead and do something - it isn't something that there's anything elusive in this.

Professor Skinner :

Well the difference between the sunflower and a person is that the person has also had a long experience; he has learned to observe himself - particularly that private world within his skin, to which no-one else has access, which we are likely then to think of as being non-physical or something of that kind.

But we have all learned from childhood to tell people what we are feeling and what we are feeling is, I suppose, always a state of our body, or what we intend to do, or what we are going to do, and we have good evidence about this from the actual states of our bodies. And by reporting on our purpose, we seem to indicate a prior purpose but what we report on is a disposition

to act, which again is the product of an earlier set of consequences. So that we do not act because of a felt purpose, we act and, beforehand, feel a purpose both for the same reasons which are to be found in the past history. This is impossible for the sunflower - it has not learned to observe itself or to report on what it is doing, it has no capacity for analysing its behaviour, when we have.

I think actually by the experimental analysis of the role of the environment, we are discovering new kinds of self-observation, new kinds of self-knowledge.

I think the thing the point where we differ is you, I believe, want to give some kinds of dimensions to these purposes, intentions, and so on that I want to avoid. When I said the idea of going to the Theatre occurred to me; what I should say (I believe it) the behaviour of going to the Theatre occurred to me.

Professor Warnock :

Well why

Well that occurred Yes, why do you want to get away from saying the 'thought of going to the Theatre' occurred to you ?

Professor Skinner :

Because I'm worried about the dimensions of the thought. No doubt I could tell you in advance that I was going to go; in fact I bought tickets and so on, so that I was aware of the probability that I would go, and I was aware of the preparatory behaviours in which I engaged but I want those to remain behaviour. Or, at least, visible states of probabilities of behaviour which I can, being an introspective person, report. Though I'm not reporting something in a different world. A mentalistic world.

Professor Warnock :

Oh well I don't mind that - Yes. I mean I don't want there

to be more than one world, any more than you do I think. No.

Professor Skinner :

I think we can agree then that if that is the case then I believe we ought to look at the kind of influences that lead us to set up, to propose the existence of an idea, an intention of a purpose. But our evidences, and I would like to do it that way because I believe that gives me an advantage.

Professor Warnock :

I see - Yes.

Professor Skinner :

You're looking at the behaviour and the prior conditions.

Professor Warnock :

Yes I'm still not absolutely clear about this: as to why it should be that you want to get away from talking about people's thought and intentions. Because I mean it isn't, obviously, that one can attempt to deny that these actually occur; one is reporting something. I suppose it is that you want to say that the report that we ordinarily give is some kind of rather misleading cover for the really explanatory thing, which requires a different set of terms for its expression.

Professor Skinner :

Yes it would be unfair really Geoffrey to attribute to all of the paraphernalia of mentalism and so on, but that did exist at one time, and people gave explanations for physical action in terms of events in a non-physical world. And my feeling is that there is more of that left than we want to admit and I, perhaps overdoing it, by making it very clear that I don't want any of it left. But when I say that the idea of going to the Theatre occurred to me, I'm very suspicious of what I've said then because

what has occurred has simply been behaviour, the probability of behaviour, the strength of which I was aware of before I acted because I am in touch with my own body. It's my own body and I'm very happy to hear that you don't want to put any other kind of stuff into the body - that's fine, as if we were very much closer than I'd supposed.

Professor Vesey :

Could I now turn over to the other side of this, that is to say the morality of controlling behaviour by conditioning. Now you are in the business of controlling people's behaviour - well people as well as animals. To what ends ?

Professor Skinner :

Yes that involves a third example of selection. As far as I can see the human species has evolved various cultures, that is to say social environments in which the individual has an extraordinary advantage against life and entirely in solitude. Solitude produces the Pharaoh child, the wild boy, and that's all but with a culture human behaviour can do fantastic things because the culture stores the past experience and makes for a much more favourable environment. Now, I believe that cultures evolve but direction is not necessarily predictable in advance, but to some extent we can distinguish between cultures which make people effective and those which destroy. I believe that it is always the strength of the culture and its ultimate survival which is the value, which answers the question of the morals, of the morals lying behind the control of behaviour.

I want to build better contingencies of reinforcement in the classrooms so that students learn more rapidly and effectively and the reasons I would give have to do with the chances that this culture can solve its problems effectively.

Professor Warnock :

But Yes what I think myself, and feel here, is that this is going to lead into enormously more controversial territory - perhaps than you have recognised. You see I am reminded here of former distinguished thinker - namely the philosopher Hobbs who, like you, I suppose could be described as a materialist - you wouldn't mind that! Certainly determinate, and certainly believed (he didn't know as much about it as you do) but he certainly believed that the way people behave could be controlled by supplying the appropriate conditions for them.

But now Hobbs in that enormous work of his called Leviathan of course, was very conscious that this led him directly into fundamental political problems. If it's the case that we have what you call a technology of behaviour, if that's to say it is possible effectively to get people to behave in this way or that, then surely there arises an enormous range of what are political, partly moral questions, about through what Institutions this sort of control is to be exercised, to what ends, ends selected by whom and all these are enormously difficult questions which are bound to get one, I should have thought, into political argument, of a very fundamental kind.

Professor Skinner :

I agree it does and I not only recognise, I have other people point them out again and again. This is the problem and it is not, I think, the result of something being wrong in the formulation but rather the fact that survival is a very, very difficult value. How can anyone predict the exigencies to be encountered by a culture or a state or a political organisation, or an economic system. How can one prescribe the behaviour to the most effective they're going to contend with these conditions. That's where the trouble comes and that's why you have different political

philosophies, different systems of economics and so on. But that is nothing that I can do anything about - we are all in the same boat on that. We all have difficulties in deciding what is to be done, but if I have any expertise at all, I'd enter it in the field of how to do it after one decides.

Professor Warnock :

Yes Yes Ah that would mean that you would maintain the distinction, which I suppose people would tend to take for granted between possessing a technology and determining how it is to be applied.

Professor Skinner :

Absolutely except that I don't believe that a second requires any special wisdom denied to the scientist and available to the Philosopher.

Professor Warnock :

Ah No possibly it isn't either solved by any special expertise possessed of the kind.

Professor Skinner :

However, we ought to be able to analyse human behaviour as it tries to deal with the difficulties in the field of moral judgment, that value judgments. I again I trust you would still go along that the moral is not a different world, it is the world we are living in. It has something to do with practical problems in that world. We're not moving into another kind of atmosphere, or another kind of spiritual condition or anything like that kind - we're solving practical problems, somehow or other, with whatever is available.

Professor Warnock :

Yes Yes. There is one other point at which - I'm not saying

that Hobbs (to go back to him) is in a stronger position than you are - I think he's in a clearer position! When he was clear that the over-riding value which we ought to try and secure was personal survival of the individual: that this was THE thing that really should be aimed at above all things.

Well at least I understand quite clearly what Hobbs means when he says that. Whereas I'm bound to say - this may simply be that the needs further explanation, but the notion of the survival of a culture I find very much more difficult to understand. I mean how one is to identify a culture, what would count as it surviving or not surviving because presumably cultures are always undergoing processes of change - well when does change amount to not surviving?

Professor Vesey :

Changes in culture - Yes now I think that raises the question as to what changes in the culture are desirable and how is that question to be settled because you can't answer IT in terms of the survival of that culture.

Professor Skinner :

You can only answer it to the extent that you can predict some of the contingencies of survival which are to be met by the culture and that's a very difficult thing. Survival is a very weak sort of value for predictive purposes. But we can still make some decisions, some kinds of things simply must be changed now if we are to prevent disaster with over-population, using up of resources, pollution of the environment and so on. We're not precisely sure how the culture would perish if we did nothing about this: we've a pretty good idea of the ~~xxx~~ kinds of changes we need to make. We need to change practices which are continuing trends in certain directions.

Professor Warnock :

But I don't think, does it, that that fully answers the question that Godfrey was raising. You see, he raised the question What changes in the culture are desirable? And, if I understood what you said, you were saying Well changes in the culture are pretty unpredictable or difficult to predict. But even if we could predict them we would still have to decide which of them we wanted to try and bring about - would we not?

Professor Skinner :

Well it's a matter of priority. I mean which one would you tackle first or something of that kind with available facilities

Professor Warnock :

No not just priority I think. Supposing we all would agree that we want to avoid some sort of major collapse and cataclysm I mean everybody would agree about that. But given that we're all agreed in avoiding that, there are surely a large number of options: I mean different kinds of culture all of which would count as survivals in one way or another of our culture.

Professor Skinner :

I think it's a mistake to get tangled up in a question of values, I don't know. I seem to be able to set up values for something perfectly reasonable and I don't see any debate. For example I think that you could say that the culture would be stronger if every person in it capable of having a job, that he likes what he does, and he works well and carefully. That seems to me so obvious that a culture is better off if that is the case. I think it's terribly important that educational systems be available so that young people acquire what they need to learn as quickly and efficiently as possible. Now I feel questions as to what they ought to learn but even that I think is not the kind of thing

that one can say something about. I think we're much better if we get along with each other without War and I should certainly put that first perhaps as a value and I really don't want to quibble about whether it might not, in some sense, be better if the world was continuously at War.

Professor Warnock :

Ah nobody's going to disagree with you about that. Certainly. And I go further than that - I would entirely agree with you that there is an enormous range of extremely important agreements as to what state of affairs are desirable and, if possible, to be brought about or not.

I think perhaps the difference between us would amount to your being more hopeful or procuring general assent to certain propositions about the desirability of a kind of culture than I would. I mean I would think there would be more residual disagreement - I'm sure the difference is of taste perhaps.

SKINNER : Well it might be that, it might be temperament or something like that kind. But I think also, and I'm not saying it to boast at all, but the particular speciality to which I have devoted my life, has given me very great reason to believe that changes can be brought about which we used to think were impossible. I'm not pulling rank on you at all on this but I would attribute my optimism to some rather substantial demonstrations. That things can be done that we thought impossible.

Professor Warnock :

Yes we're still going to leave us with the question whether we can do them or not.

Professor Skinner :

Yes I think that is a question and if I am convinced that we should, then it is up to me to apply by behavioural engineering

to convince you and others and get things done,

Professor Warnock :

I'd rather you tried to persuade me.

Professor Skinner :

Well that would actually happen - that would then be a demonstration that our culture has, somehow or other, created conditions under which something is done to move the culture in a given direction. Now if the culture then perishes, so much the worse for the culture, but at least it was an evolutionary try in one direction. Some other culture will come up with something better.

Professor Warnock :

Yes. Could I bring up a related, slightly different point. You talked just now about moving the culture in a given direction and of course in your statement of your position you, very often, use the word 'control' controlling the environment and thereby controlling the behaviour of people.

Now I'm sure that a great many of the readers of your books would get the impression from this that what you envisaged was a kind of master mind, a master manipulator occupying the somewhat the relation to humanity at large as the man in the white coat occupies the laboratory pigeon. And a great many people I am sure find this an unattractive picture.

Professor Skinner :

Very much so - I do myself. I think that a person who begins to understand behaviour in a more effective way will find function as some kind of specialist, who will give advice, but will not himself actually put it into effect. All I foresee is that the teacher will teach more effectively, people who arrange incentive conditions will arrange more effective incentive

conditions. If there's any controlling power to remain where it is now but I would like to suppose that a culture will evolve in which it is impossible for concentrations of power to make dictators possible. I would suppose that the future does not lie in any one man - benevolent or otherwise but in a culture which is the ultimate determiner of what kind of men emerge in power to make you use of available scientific knowledge.

Professor Vesey :

Well I think these political questions could take a whole other debate so on that note we'll have to end. Fred Skinner, Geoffrey Warnock - thank you.

END CREDITS

1) Taking part were
 Professor B.F. Skinner

 Geoffrey Warnock

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2) Lighting Cameraman
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Sound Recordist
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Film Editor
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