Book Reviews


Since his death in 1990, at least half a dozen major examinations of the life and work of Burrhus Frederic (B. F.) Skinner have been published. The focus tends to be one of two general types: either an appreciation of Skinner the man and his contributions (Bjork, 1993; Wiener, 1996) or a critique and an aid to further understanding of radical behaviorism and the controversies it generated (Todd & Morris, 1992; Nye, 1992). There is little doubt that the reason for continued interest lies in the significant contributions Skinner made to psychology. In fact, an article (Hagbloom et al., 2002) in the Review of General Psychology, using scores on three quantitative and three qualitative variables, showed Skinner to be “the most eminent psychologist of the twentieth century” (p. 146).

The most recent book and subject of this review is O’Donohue and Ferguson’s The Psychology of B. F. Skinner (2001). While primarily targeted at academics and students, this text is also of general interest and would be appropriate for anyone interested in B. F. Skinner. Chapters cover Skinner’s personal history, intellectual foundation, philosophy of science and experimental analysis of behavior, and contributions to human welfare, among other things. A unique feature is a clear explanation of what the authors consider to be both valid and invalid criticisms of Skinner’s work.

O’Donohue and Ferguson’s goal is to provide a complete exegesis of Skinner's work. The authors believe that to fully understand Skinner's contributions, a reader must grasp the interrelationship among (a) his philosophy of science, (b) his unique research methodology and the regularities that are a consequence of it, and (c) the practical extensions of this philosophy, research methodology, and principles to applied problems. They say that most of the criticism of Skinner was due to a misunderstanding of the original work.

In addition to presenting biographical information, O’Donohue and Ferguson outline Skinner’s intellectual influences, beginning with Francis Bacon and proceeding to Ernst Mach, Ivan Pavlov, Edward Thorndike, John Watson, and Charles Darwin. While each of the influences is described clearly, the most detailed discussion is reserved for Bacon, Darwin, and Watson. The authors make a detailed case for Bacon's influence and discuss Skinner’s incorporation of Darwin’s evolutionary principles, especially selection. Watson’s Behaviorism was obviously an important influence on Skinner's thinking, but most of the discussion of Watson focuses on
his methodological behaviorism and the ways in which it differs from Skinner’s radical behaviorism. This section alone is a valuable contribution to the field.

The authors provide a 16-point overview of Skinner’s philosophical system (radical behaviorism) that covers the goals (prediction and control), subject matter (behavior), basic datum (rate), and more (single subjects, induction, causation, private events, etc.). They also describe how radical behaviorism relates to logical positivism, because the demise of the latter is often given as evidence that the former is no longer relevant. The other half of Skinner’s system is operant conditioning and the experimental analysis of behavior. The authors provide a concise overview of the basic principles and methods used by modern behavior analysts, as well as a thorough discussion of the difference between reward and reinforcement and elicited and emitted behavior.

Over the course of several chapters, O’Donohue and Ferguson outline what they believe to be Skinner’s most important contributions. They cite his analysis of cognition and verbal behavior, providing considerable detail about Verbal Behavior (1957) and the effect of Chomsky’s review (1959) of the book itself and radical behaviorism as an ascendant paradigm. Also described are Skinner’s applied behavior analysis, self-management techniques, and attempts to improve on societal conditions. Behavior analysis has been used to design treatments for drug abuse, marriage counseling, classroom management, autism and developmental disabilities, weight loss, sports and organizational psychology, animal training, delinquency, and brain injury, to name just a few. Two unique characteristics of B. F. Skinner were his eagerness to apply this science to his own behavior and his desire to create a better world with the same principles he applied in his own life.

The authors spend the latter portion of the book describing what they see to be both valid and invalid criticisms of Skinner’s work. They begin by describing the difference between good and bad exegesis and valid and invalid criticism. They then describe eight invalid criticisms, one of which is that Skinner’s science of behavior does not deal with consciousness, cognitive processes, feelings, and states of mind. The authors answer this observation by describing Skinner’s analysis of private events. Another extensive example concerns Noam Chomsky’s review of Skinner’s Verbal Behavior. Because it was so influential, as well as clearly bad in its exegesis, the authors spend several pages outlining his criticisms and responding to them. Their rebuttal is largely based on MacCorquodale’s (1970) response to Chomsky.

What O’Donohue and Ferguson consider valid criticisms will strike some readers as obvious and others as preposterous. In either case, the material is thought-provoking and should facilitate lively discussion among professionals and in the classroom. First, the authors consider Skinner’s analysis of punishment to be, at best, “only partly true.” Contrary to common conception, Skinner consistently warned of the many ill effects associated with punishment and discouraged its use. In contrast, applied behavior analysts have used punishment to great effect when dealing with very difficult behaviors, especially self-injurious ones. Second, the authors say that Skinner’s science of behavior is stimulus-response psychology and results in a mechanistic conception. Third, they don’t think that Skinner dealt effectively with creative behavior. Fourth, the authors make a case for the limited relevance of the experimental analysis to complex human behavior. They conclude that it is an adequate foundation on which others have built
and will continue to build (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). Finally, the science of behavior cannot be used to adequately understand, predict, or control the behavior of any species “without knowledge of its instinctive patterns, evolutionary history, and ecological niche.”

*The Psychology of B. F. Skinner* is unique in that it is both an appreciation of Skinner’s work and a thoughtful critique of radical behaviorism and the experimental analysis of behavior. At times the vocabulary seems unnecessarily obscure, and the text slips into an awkward colloquial style (e.g., “Hawaiian Tropic bikini girls,” “drag of marijuana,” “turn the damn thing off”). Otherwise, this is one of the best presentations of Skinner and behavior analysis to date. It is well balanced and fair. There are extensive footnotes, clever and contemporary examples, and copious quotations throughout. O’Donohue and Ferguson support their positions clearly and are well versed in Skinner’s work. When presented with someone of B. F. Skinner’s stature, we tend to uncritically accept all that he said. Such approval would be bad exegesis. While it is clear that the authors admire Skinner’s work, they do not hesitate to highlight perceived weaknesses with an eye to advancing the field in general. They, like Skinner himself, do not accept anything on the basis of authority alone.

References


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