

# Beyond Freedom and Dignity

B. F. Skinner

“Each of us,” [T. E.] Frazier began, “is engaged in a pitched battle with the rest of mankind.”

“A curious premise for a Utopia,” said [Augustine] Castle. “Even a pessimist like myself takes a more hopeful view than that.”

“You do, you do,” said Frazier. “But let’s be realistic. Each of us has interests which conflict with the interests of everybody else. That’s our original sin, and it can’t be helped. Now, ‘everybody else’ we call ‘society.’ It’s a powerful opponent, and it always wins. . . . Society attacks early, when the individual is helpless. It enslaves him almost before he has tasted freedom. . . .

“Considering how long society has been at it, you’d expect a better job. But the campaigns have been badly planned and the victory has never been secure. The behavior of the individual has been shaped according to revelations of ‘good conduct,’ never as the result of experimental study. But why not experiment? The questions are simple enough. What’s the best behavior for the individual so far as the group is concerned? And how can the individual be induced to behave in that way? Why not explore these questions in a specific spirit?

“We could do just that in Walden Two. We had already worked out a code of conduct—subject, of course, to experimental modification. The code would keep things running smoothly if everybody lived up to it. Our job was to see that everybody did. Now, you can’t get people to follow a useful code by making them into so many jacks-in-the-box. You can’t foresee all future circumstances, and you can’t specify adequate future conduct. You don’t know what will be required. Instead you have to set up certain behavioral processes which will lead the individual to design his own ‘good’ conduct when the time comes. We call

that sort of thing ‘self-control.’ But don’t be misled, the control always rests in the last analysis in the hands of society.

“One of our Planners, a young man named Simmons, worked with me. . . .

. . . Simmons and I began by studying the great works on morals and ethics . . . ; there were scores of them. We were looking for any and every method of shaping human behavior by imparting techniques of self-control. Some techniques were obvious enough, for they had marked turning points in human history. ‘Love your enemies’ is an example—a psychological invention for easing the lot of an oppressed people. The severest trial of oppression is the constant rage which one suffers at the thought of the oppressor. What Jesus discovered was how to avoid these inner devastations. His technique was to *practice the opposite emotion*. If a man can succeed in ‘loving his enemies’ and ‘taking no thought for the morrow,’ he will no longer be assailed by hatred of the oppressor or rage at the loss of his freedom or possessions. He may not get his freedom or possessions back, but he’s less miserable. It’s a difficult lesson. It comes late in our program.” . . .

“When Simmons and I had collected our techniques of control, we had to discover how to teach them. That was more difficult. Current educational practices were of little value, and religious practices scarcely any better. Promising paradise or threatening hell-fire is, we assumed, generally admitted to be unproductive. It is based upon a fundamental fraud which, when discovered, turns the individual against society and nourishes the very thing it tries to stamp out. What Jesus offered in return for loving one’s enemies was heaven *on earth*, better known as peace of mind.

“We found a few suggestions worth following in the practices of the clinical psychologist. We undertook to build a tolerance for annoying experiences. The sunshine of midday is extremely painful if you come from a dark room, but take it in easy stages and you can avoid pain altogether. The analogy can be misleading, but in much the same way it’s possible to build a tolerance to painful or distasteful stimuli, or to frustration, or to situations which arouse fear, anger or rage. Society and nature throw these annoyances at the individual with no regard for the development of tolerances. Some achieve tolerances, most fail. Where would the science of immunization be if it followed a schedule of accidental dosages?”

“Take the principle of ‘Get thee behind me, Satan,’ for example,” Frazier continued. “It’s a special case of self-control by altering the environment. Subclass A 3, I believe. We give each child a lollipop which has been dipped in powdered sugar so that a single touch of the tongue can be detected. We tell him he may eat the lollipop later in the day, provided it hasn’t already been licked. Since the child is only three or four, it is a fairly diff—”

“Three or four!” Castle exclaimed.

“All our ethical training is completed by the age of six,” said Frazier quietly. “A simple principle like putting temptation out of sight would be acquired before four. But at such an early age the problem of not licking the lollipop isn’t easy. Now, what would you do, Mr. Castle, in a similar situation?”

“Put the lollipop out of sight as quickly as possible.”

“Exactly. I can see you’ve been well trained. Or perhaps you discovered the principle for yourself. We’re in favor of original inquiry wherever possible, but in this case we have a more important goal and we don’t hesitate to give verbal help. First of all, the children are urged to examine their own behavior while looking at the lollipops. This helps them to recognize the need for self-control. Then the lollipops are concealed, and the children are asked to notice any gain in happiness or any reduction in tension. Then a strong distraction is arranged—say, an interesting game. Later the children are reminded of the candy and encouraged to examine their reaction. The value of the distraction is generally obvious. Well, need I go on? When the experiment is repeated a day or so later, the children all run with the lollipops to their lockers and do ex-

actly what Mr. Castle would do—a sufficient indication of the success of our training.”

“I wish to report an objective observation of my reaction to your story,” said Castle, controlling his voice with great precision. “I find myself revolted by this display of sadistic tyranny.”

“I don’t wish to deny you the exercise of an emotion which you seem to find enjoyable,” said Frazier. “So let me go on. Concealing a tempting but forbidden object is a crude solution. For one thing, it’s not always feasible. We want a sort of psychological concealment—covering up the candy by paying no attention. In a later experiment the children wear their lollipops like crucifixes for a few hours.” . . .

“How do you build up a tolerance to an annoying situation?” I said.

“Oh, for example, by having the children ‘take’ a more and more painful shock, or drink cocoa with less and less sugar in it until a bitter concoction can be savored without a bitter face.”

“But jealousy or envy—you can’t administer them in graded doses,” I said.

“And why not? Remember, we control the social environment, too, at this age. That’s why we get our ethical training in early. Take this case. A group of children arrive home after a long walk tired and hungry. They’re expecting supper; they find, instead, that it’s time for a lesson in self-control: they must stand for five minutes in front of steaming bowls of soup.

“The assignment is accepted like a problem in arithmetic. Any groaning or complaining is a wrong answer. Instead, the children begin at once to work upon themselves to avoid any unhappiness during the delay: One of them may make a joke of it. We encourage a sense of humor as a good way of not taking an annoyance seriously. The joke won’t be much, according to adult standards—perhaps the child will simply pretend to empty the bowl of soup into his upturned mouth. Another may start a song with many verses. The rest join in at once, for they’ve learned that it’s a good way to make time pass.”

Frazier glanced uneasily at Castle, who was not to be appeased. . . .

“In a later stage we forbid all social devices. No songs, no jokes—merely silence. Each child is forced back upon his own resources—a very important step.”

“I should think so,” I said. “And how do you know it’s successful. You might produce

a lot of silently resentful children. It's certainly a dangerous stage."

"It is, and we follow each child carefully. If he hasn't picked up the necessary techniques, we start back a little. A still more advanced stage"—Frazier glanced again at Castle, who stirred uneasily—"brings me to my point. When it's time to sit down to the soup, the children count off—heads and tails. Then a coin is tossed and if it comes up heads, the 'heads' sit down and eat. The 'tails' remain standing for another five minutes."

Castle groaned.

"And you call that envy?" I asked.

"Perhaps not exactly," said Frazier. "At least there's seldom any aggression against the lucky ones. The emotion, if any, is directed against Lady Luck herself, against the toss of the coin. That, in itself, is a lesson worth learning, for it's the only direction in which emotion has a surviving chance to be useful. And resentment toward things in general, while perhaps just as silly as personal aggression, is more easily controlled. Its expression is not socially objectionable."

... "May you not inadvertently teach your children some of the very emotions you're trying to eliminate?" I said. "What's the effect, for example, of finding the anticipation of a warm supper suddenly thwarted? Doesn't that eventually lead to feelings of uncertainty, or even anxiety?"

"It might. We had to discover how often our lessons could be safely administered. But all our schedules are worked out experimentally. We watch for undesired consequences just as any scientist watches for disrupting factors in his experiments. . . .

"But *why*?" said Castle. "Why these deliberate unpleasantnesses—to put it mildly? I must say I think you and your friend Simmons are really very subtle sadists." . . .

... "[W]hat do your children get out of it?" he insisted. . . .

"If I must spell it out," Frazier began with a deep sigh, "what they get is escape from the petty emotions which eat the heart out of the unprepared. They get the satisfaction of pleasant and profitable social relations on a scale almost undreamed of in the world at large. They get immeasurably increased efficiency, because they can stick to a job without suffering the aches and pains which soon beset most of us. They get new horizons, for they are spared the emotions characteristic of frustration and failure. They get—" His eyes

searched the branches of the trees. "Is that enough?" he said at last. . . .

"What alternative *had* we?" he said, as if he were in pain. "What else could we do? For four or five years we could provide a life in which no important need would go unsatisfied, a life practically free of anxiety or frustration or annoyance. What would you do? Would you let the child enjoy this paradise with no thought for the future—like an idolatrous and pampering mother? Or would you relax control of the environment and let the child meet accidental frustrations? *But what is the virtue of accident?* No, there was only one course open to us. We had to *design* a series of adversities, so that the child would develop the greatest possible self-control. Call it deliberate, if you like, and accuse us of sadism; there was no other course." . . .

Frazier turned first to Castle.

"Have you ever taught a course in ethics, Mr. Castle?" he said.

"I have taught a course in ethics every year for thirteen years," said Castle in his most precise manner.

"Then you can tell us what the Good Life consists of," said Frazier.

"Oh, no, I can't," said Castle, "not by any means. You are thirteen years too late."

Frazier was delighted.

"Then let me tell you," he said.

"... We all know what's good, until we stop to think about it. For example, is there any doubt that health is better than sickness?" . . .

"Secondly, can anyone doubt that an absolute minimum of unpleasant labor is part of the Good Life?" Frazier turned again to Castle, but he was greeted with a sullen silence. . . .

"The Good Life also means a chance to exercise talents and abilities. And we have let it be so. We have time for sports, hobbies, arts and crafts, and most important of all, the expression of that interest in the world which is *science* in the deepest sense. It may be a casual interest in current affairs or in literature or the controlled and creative efforts of the laboratory—in any case it represents the unnecessary and pleasurable selective exploration of nature.

"And we need intimate and satisfying personal contacts. We must have the best possible chance of finding congenial spirits. Our Social Manager sees to that with many ingenious devices. And we don't restrict personal relations to conform to outmoded customs. We discourage attitudes of domination and criticism. Our goal is a general tolerance and affection.

“Last of all, the Good Life means relaxation and rest. We get that in Walden Two almost as a matter of course, but not merely because we have reduced our hours of work. In the world at large the leisure class is perhaps the least relaxed. The important thing is to satisfy our needs. Then we can give up the blind struggle to ‘have a good time’ or ‘get what we want.’ We have achieved a true leisure.

“And that’s all, Mr. Castle—absolutely all, I can’t give you a rational justification for any of it. I can’t reduce it to any principle of ‘the greatest good’. This *is* the Good Life. We know it. It’s a fact, not a theory. It has an experimental justification, not a rational one. As for your conflict of principles, that’s an experimental question, too. We don’t puzzle our little minds over the outcome of Love versus Duty. We simply arrange a world in which serious conflicts occur as seldom as possible or, with a little luck, not at all.”

Castle was gazing steadily across the evening landscape. There was no sign that he was listening. Frazier was not to be refused.

“Do you agree, Professor?” he said. There was obvious contempt for the honorific title.

“I don’t think you and I are interested in the same thing,” said Castle.

“Well, that’s what we are interested in, and I think we’ve turned the trick,” said Frazier, obviously disappointed. “Things are going well, at least.” . . .

“What’s left to motivate your workers?” I said, “Take a Manager, for example. He doesn’t work for money—that’s out. He doesn’t work for personal acclaim—that’s forbidden. What’s left? I suppose you’d say he works to avoid the consequences of failure. He has to keep going or he’ll be held responsible for the resulting mess.”

“I wouldn’t say that. We don’t condemn a man for poor work. After all, if we don’t praise him, it would be unfair to blame him.”

“You mean you would let an incompetent man continue to do a poor job?” said Castle.

“By no means. He would be given other work, and a competent man brought in. But he wouldn’t be blamed.”

“For heaven’s sake, why not?” said Castle.

“Do you blame a man for getting sick?”

“Of course not.”

“But poor work by a capable man is a form of illness.” . . .

“How do you treat a man for a bad case of ‘poor work’?” I asked.

“With common sense! Take him off the job. If the boy who has charge of collecting eggs

breaks too many, give him other work. And the same with a Manager. But why condemn him? Or blame him?”

“I should think you might encourage a sort of malingering,” I said. “Wouldn’t a man be tempted to do poor work in order to get an easier job?—Oh, well. Forgive me. I see the answer to that: you have no easier jobs, of course. And he could change jobs freely anyway. I’m sorry.”

“But what if a man did poor work, or none at all, every job you put him on?” said Castle.

“The disease would be judged quite serious, and the man would be sent to one of our psychologists. It’s more likely that he would long since have gone of his own accord. This would happen before any very critical condition developed, and a cure would be quite possible. But compare the situation in the outside world. There the man would have stuck to his job in spite of his indisposition—that is, in spite of his desire not to work or work well—because he needed the wages, or was afraid of censure, or because another job wasn’t available. The condition would have become critical. I think it’s that kind of ultimate violent revolt that you’re thinking about. It’s quite unlikely here.”

“But what would you do if it occurred?” Castle insisted. “Certainly you can conceive of a member refusing to work.”

“We should deal with it somehow. I don’t know. You might as well ask what we should do if leprosy broke out. We’d think of something. We aren’t helpless.” . . .

“A modern, mechanized, managerial Machiavelli—that is my final estimate of you, Mr. Frazier,” [Castle] said, with the same challenging stare.

“It must be gratifying to know that one has reached a ‘final estimate,’” said Frazier.

“An artist in power,” Castle continued, “whose greatest art is to conceal art. The silent despot.” . . .

“ . . . So far as I can see, you’ve blocked every path through which man was to struggle upward toward salvation. Intelligence, initiative—you have filled their places with a sort of degraded instinct, engineered compulsion. Walden Two is a marvel of efficient coordination—as efficient as an anthill!”

“Replacing intelligence with instinct—” muttered Frazier. “I had never thought of that. It’s an interesting possibility. How’s it done?” It was a crude maneuver. The question was a digression, intended to spoil Castle’s timing

and to direct our attention to practical affairs in which Frazier was more at home.

"The behavior of your members is carefully shaped in advance by a Plan," said Castle, not to be taken in, "and it's shaped to perpetuate that Plan. Intellectually Walden Two is quite as incapable of a spontaneous change of course as the life within a beehive."

"I see what you mean," said Frazier distantly. But he returned to his strategy. "And have you discovered the machinery of my power?"

"I have, indeed. We were looking in the wrong place. There's no *current* contact between you and the members of Walden Two. . . . But you were behaving as a despot when you first laid your plans—when you designed the social structure and drew up the contract between community and member, when you worked out your educational practices and your guarantees against despotism. . . ."

"I've admitted neither power nor despotism [Frazier replied]. But you're quite right in saying that I've exerted an influence and in one sense will continue to exert it forever. . . . I did plan Walden Two—not as an architect plans a building, but as a scientist plans a long-term experiment, uncertain of the conditions he will meet but knowing how he will deal with them when they arise. In a sense, Walden Two is predetermined, but not as the behavior of a beehive is determined. Intelligence, no matter how much it may be shaped and extended by our educational system, will still function as intelligence. It will be used to puzzle out solutions to problems to which a beehive would quickly succumb. What the plan does is to keep intelligence on the right track, for the good of society rather than of the intelligent individual—or for the eventual rather than the immediate good of the individual. It does this by making sure that the individual will not forget his personal stake in the welfare of society."

"But you are forestalling many possibly useful acts of intelligence which aren't encompassed by your plan. You have ruled out points of view which may be more productive. You are implying that T. E. Frazier, looking at the world from the middle of the twentieth century, understands the best course for mankind forever. . . ."

"Mr. Castle," said Frazier very earnestly, "let me ask you a question. I warn you, it will be the most terrifying question of your life. *What would you do if you found yourself in possession of an effective science of behavior?* Sup-

pose you suddenly found it possible to control the behavior of men as you wished. What would you do?"

"That's an assumption?"

"Take it as one if you like. I take it as a fact. And apparently you accept it as a fact too. I can hardly be as despotic as you claim unless I hold the key to an extensive practical control."

"What would I do?" said Castle thoughtfully. "I think I would dump your science of behavior in the ocean."

"And deny men all the help you could otherwise give them?"

"And give them the freedom they would otherwise lose forever!"

"How could you give them freedom?"

"By refusing to control them!"

"But you would only be leaving the control in other hands."

"Whose?"

"The charlatan, the demagogue, the salesman, the ward heeler, the bully, the cheat, the educator, the priest—all who are now in possession of the techniques of behavioral engineering."

"A pretty good share of the control would remain in the hands of the individual himself."

"That's an assumption, too, and it's your only hope. It's your only possible chance to avoid the implications of a science of behavior. If man is free, then a technology of behavior is impossible. But I'm asking you to consider the other case."

"Then my answer is that your assumption is contrary to fact and any further consideration idle."

"And your accusations—?"

"—were in terms of intention, not of possible achievement."

Frazier sighed dramatically.

"It's a little late to be proving that a behavioral technology is well advanced. How can you deny it? Many of its members and techniques are really as old as the hills. Look at their frightful misuse in the hands of the Nazis! And what about the techniques of the psychological clinic? What about education? Or religion? Or practical politics? Or advertising and salesmanship? Bring them all together and you have a sort of rule-of-thumb technology of vast power. No, Mr. Castle, the science is there for the asking. But its techniques and methods are in the wrong hands—they are used for personal aggrandizement in a competitive world or, in the case of the psycholo-

gist and educator, for futilely corrective purposes. My question is, have you the courage to take up and wield the science of behavior for the good of mankind? You answer that you would dump it in the ocean!"

"I'd want to take it out of the hands of the politicians and advertisers and salesmen, too."

"And the psychologists and educators? You see, Mr. Castle, you can't have that kind of cake. The fact is, we not only *can* control human behavior, we *must*. But who's to do it, and what's to be done?"

"So long as a trace of personal freedom survives, I'll stick to my position," said Castle. . . .

"Isn't it time we talked about freedom?" I said. "We parted a day or so ago on an agreement to let the question of freedom ring. It's time to answer, don't you think?"

"My answer is simple enough," said Frazier. "I deny that freedom exists at all. I must deny it—or my program would be absurd. You can't have a science about a subject matter which hops capriciously about. Perhaps we can never *prove* that man isn't free; it's an assumption. But the increasing success of a science of behavior makes it more and more plausible."

"On the contrary, a simple personal experience makes it untenable," said Castle. "The experience of freedom. I *know* that I'm free."

"It must be quite consoling," said Frazier.

"And what's more—you do, too," said Castle hotly. "When you deny your own freedom for the sake of playing with a science of behavior, you're acting in plain bad faith. That's the only way I can explain it." He tried to recover himself and shrugged his shoulders. "At least you'll grant that you *feel* free."

"The 'feeling of freedom' should deceive no one," said Frazier. "Give me a concrete case."

"Well, right now," Castle said. He picked up a book of matches. "I'm free to hold or drop these matches."

"You will, of course, do one or the other," said Frazier. "Linguistically or logically there seem to be two possibilities, but I submit that there's only one in fact. The determining forces may be subtle but they are inexorable. I suggest that as an orderly person you will probably hold—ah! you drop them! Well, you see, that's all part of your behavior with respect to me. You couldn't resist the temptation to prove me wrong. It was all lawful. You had no choice. The deciding factor entered rather late, and naturally you couldn't foresee the result when you first held them up. There was no strong likelihood that you would act in

either direction, and so you said you were free."

"That's entirely too glib," said Castle. "It's easy to argue lawfulness after the fact. But let's see you predict what I will do in advance. Then I'll agree there's law."

"I didn't say that behavior is always predictable, any more than the weather is always predictable. There are often too many factors to be taken into account. We can't measure them all accurately, and we couldn't perform the mathematical operations needed to make a prediction if we had the measurements. . . .

"Take a case where there's no choice, then," said Castle. "Certainly a man in jail isn't free in the sense in which I am free now."

"Good! That's an excellent start. Let us classify the kinds of determiners of human behavior. One class, as you suggest, is physical restraint—handcuffs, iron bars, forcible coercion. These are ways in which we shape human behavior according to our wishes. They're crude, and they sacrifice the affection of the controllee, but they often work. Now, what other ways are there of limiting freedom?"

Frazier had adopted a professional tone and Castle refused to answer.

"The threat of force would be one," I said.

"Right. And here again we shan't encourage any loyalty on the part of the controllee. He has perhaps a shade more of the feeling of freedom, since he can always 'choose to act and accept the consequences,' but he doesn't feel exactly free. He knows his behavior is being coerced. Now what else?"

I had no answer.

"Force or the threat of force—I see no other possibility," said Castle after a moment.

"Precisely," said Frazier.

"But certainly a large part of my behavior has no connection with force at all. There's my freedom!" said Castle.

"I wasn't agreeing that there was no other possibility—merely that *you* could see no other. Not being a good behaviorist—or a good Christian, for that matter—you have no feeling for a tremendous power of a different sort."

"What's that?"

"I shall have to be technical," said Frazier. "But only for a moment. It's what the science of behavior calls 'reinforcement theory.' The things that can happen to us fall into three classes. To some things we are indifferent. Other things we like—we want them to happen, and we take steps to make them happen again. Still other things we don't like—we

don't want them to happen and we take steps to get rid of them or keep them from happening again.

"Now," Frazier continued earnestly, "if it's in our power to create any of the situations which a person likes or to remove any situation he doesn't like, we can control his behavior. When he behaves as we want him to behave, we simply create a situation he likes, or remove one he doesn't like. As a result, the probability that he will behave that way again goes up, which is what we want. Technically it's called 'positive reinforcement.'

"The old school made the amazing mistake of supposing that the reverse was true, that by removing a situation a person likes or setting up one he doesn't like—in other words by punishing him—it was possible to *reduce* the probability that he would behave in a given way again. That simply doesn't hold. It has been established beyond question. What is emerging at this critical stage in the evolution of society is a behavioral and cultural technology based on positive reinforcement alone. We are gradually discovering—at an untold cost in human suffering—that in the long run punishment doesn't reduce the probability that an act will occur. We have been so preoccupied with the contrary that we always take 'force' to mean punishment. We don't say we're using force when we send shiploads of food into a starving country, though we're displaying quite as much *power* as if we were sending troops and guns."

"Now that we *know* how positive reinforcement works and why negative doesn't," he said at last, "we can be more deliberate, and hence more successful, in our cultural design. We can achieve a sort of control under which the controlled, though they are following a code much more scrupulously than was ever the case under the old system, nevertheless *feel free*. They are doing what they want to do, not what they are forced to do. That's the source of the tremendous power of positive reinforcement—there's no restraint and no revolt. By a careful design, we control not the final behavior, but the *inclination* to behave—the motives, the desires, the wishes.

"The curious thing is that in that case *the question of freedom never arises*. Mr. Castle was

free to drop the matchbook in the sense that nothing was preventing him. If it had been securely bound to his hand he wouldn't have been free. Nor would he have been quite free if I'd covered him with a gun and threatened to shoot him if he let it fall. The question of freedom arises when there is restraint—either physical or psychological.

"But restraint is only one sort of control, and absence of restraint isn't freedom. It's not control that's lacking when one feels 'free,' but the objectionable control of force. Mr. Castle felt free to hold or drop the matches in the sense that he felt no restraint—no threat of punishment in taking either course of action. He neglected to examine his positive reasons for holding or letting go, in spite of the fact that these were more compelling in this instance than any threat of force." . . .

"The question is: Can men live in freedom and peace? And the answer is: Yes, if we can build a social structure which will satisfy the needs of everyone and in which everyone will want to observe the supporting code. But so far this has been achieved only in Walden Two. Your ruthless accusations to the contrary, Mr. Castle, this is the freest place on earth. And it is free precisely because we make no use of force or the threat of force. Every bit of our research, from the nursery through the psychological management of our adult membership, is directed toward that end—to exploit every alternative to forcible control. By skillful planning, by a wise choice of techniques we *increase* the feeling of freedom.

"It's not planning which infringes upon freedom, but planning which uses force. A sense of freedom was practically unknown in the planned society of Nazi Germany, because the planners made a fantastic use of force and the threat of force.

"No, Mr. Castle, when a science of behavior has once been achieved, there's no alternative to a planned society. We can't leave mankind to an accidental or biased control. But by using the principle of positive reinforcement—carefully avoiding force or the threat of force—we can preserve a personal sense of freedom."