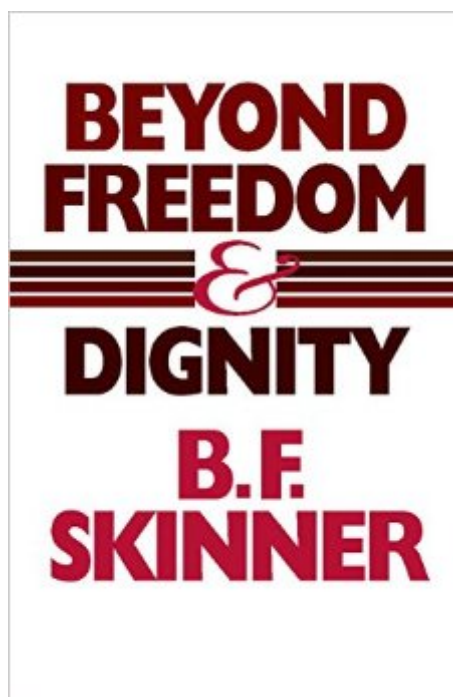


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Beyond Freedom And Dignity (Hackett Classics)



Synopsis

In this profound and profoundly controversial work, a landmark of 20th-century thought originally published in 1971, B. F. Skinner makes his definitive statement about humankind and society. Insisting that the problems of the world today can be solved only by dealing much more effectively with human behavior, Skinner argues that our traditional concepts of freedom and dignity must be sharply revised. They have played an important historical role in our struggle against many kinds of tyranny, he acknowledges, but they are now responsible for the futile defense of a presumed free and autonomous individual; they are perpetuating our use of punishment and blocking the development of more effective cultural practices. Basing his arguments on the massive results of the experimental analysis of behavior he pioneered, Skinner rejects traditional explanations of behavior in terms of states of mind, feelings, and other mental attributes in favor of explanations to be sought in the interaction between genetic endowment and personal history. He argues that instead of promoting freedom and dignity as personal attributes, we should direct our attention to the physical and social environments in which people live. It is the environment rather than humankind itself that must be changed if the traditional goals of the struggle for freedom and dignity are to be reached. *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* urges us to reexamine the ideals we have taken for granted and to consider the possibility of a radically behaviorist approach to human problems--one that has appeared to some incompatible with those ideals, but which envisions the building of a world in which humankind can attain its greatest possible achievements.

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Customer Reviews

This is a great book. It argues that: 1) the human race faces great and urgent problems, such as overpopulation and habitat destruction. 2) we don't behave all that well: we're having difficulty addressing the urgent problems. 3) a scientific approach may be able to help. 4) indeed, a "technology of behavior" is being developed and shows promise. This includes Skinner's experimental findings and conclusions, for example, the role of operant conditioning and the limitations of punishment. 5) Using this emerging technology of behavior, individuals can manage themselves better (as Skinner demonstrated with himself). As a race, we should also be able to use this technology to manage ourselves collectively better. 6) We are being managed (i.e. controlled) anyway, often by forces we either aren't aware of or don't grasp the impact of. 7) If we took control of this technology of behavior, applying it as it is and developing it further, we might be able to save ourselves from the urgent problems that confront us. 8) A key obstacle to the application and further development of this technology is our belief that we are somehow ultimately free of external causes. We believe in free will (freedom or autonomy) and consequently we take credit (feel dignity) for things we really don't have much or any control over. 9) If we look at the explanations we offer on the basis of our freedom and dignity, we may see that they cover up huge areas of ignorance we have as to why we behave as we do. And if we look at our behavior, we see that we don't control it as much as we think we can (consider the problem people have with obesity or addiction) and we take credit for things we aren't responsible for (including what now appear to be genetic endowments).

B. F. Skinner (1909-1990) was a prominent professor of psychology at Harvard (1958-1974) and a founder of Operant and Behavioral Psychology. I revisited his work while researching my paper, "Violence, mental illness and the brain -- A brief history of psychosurgery" for Surgical Neurology International (SNI). Although more than 40 years have elapsed since publication of his book and my study of the subject in college, it deserves a reappraisal since history seems to repeat itself because man forgets, insisting on reinventing the wheel for his fellowman's edification or his own vanity. Besides, Skinner's 1957 book, Verbal Behavior, was reprinted in 1992 and in the last decade has been resurgent in psychological research and applications. And even more revealing, in a 2002 survey Skinner was listed as the most influential psychologist of the 20th century. In his book, Beyond Freedom and Dignity (1971), Skinner waged war against the cherished Western concept of individual freedom and the dignity of man. Again and again, he assailed and derided "the literature of freedom and dignity" and the concept of "autonomous man," as enemies of progress. And yet his

book was well received and became a best seller, presumably because the subtle use of behavioral controls and regimentation of society appealed to academics, as well as to authoritarian collectivists on the left and law and order "conservatives" on the right, in the wake of the upheaval and disruptive turbulence of the 1960s and the fads for novelty that followed in the 1970s. According to Skinner, operant conditioning plays a larger role in the survival of organisms and evolution than the supposedly innate "fight or flight" reactions of animal or man.

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