

A Review of *No Virtue in Accident: Behavioral Analysis and Utopian Literature*, by Bobby Newman (Dove and Orca, Publishers, 1996)¹

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Not in some Utopia-subterranean fields,-
or on some secret island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us, -the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!

- William Wordsworth

Readers of *Behavior and Social Issues* will likely find this an interesting little book. It is 100 word processed pages long, not formally typeset, and is in part a collection of the author's previously published essays which appeared in *The Behavior Analyst*. Two reciprocal themes are present: how behavior analysts and humanists have interacted with each other in print, and how behavior analysts and commentators on utopian writing have had similar exchanges. As Newman has ably argued at greater length elsewhere (Newman, 1992), to a great extent, behavior analysis is the application of humanistic philosophy. Unfortunately influential segments within the humanistic camp are either unfamiliar with, or reject, the compelling parallels between the two fields, and behaviorism has fared less well at the pens of the humanists than the latter have at those of the former. One thing I learned from this book is that humanists, like members of many disciplines, can be divided into hard and soft varieties, with the former stressing reason, science, and critical thinking, (materialists and realists, in a philosophical sense) and the latter holding the view that humanity is a more elevated aspect of the universe than can be accounted for by science. Most (but not all) of the criticisms of behaviorism come from the latter group.

Behaviorists (notably Skinner) have contributed numerous constructive applications to the literature on utopian cultures. Regrettably, commentators on this literature have often chosen to interpret these contributions as either satire, as *dystopian*, or in the worst case as the foundation for a totalitarian state ruled by skilled behavioral manipulators, a regime made more pernicious by the fact that

¹ Available from Bookmasters, Inc., 800-247-6553.

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everyone will be happy performing their coerced roles! Oddly, such fears would seem to acknowledge that the principles of behaviorism are accurate accounts of human nature and have the potential to yield effective technologies of governance. Why these should be assumed to emerge as malignant as opposed to benign is not clear.

In large part, Newman's present book is an effort to correct misconceptions about behavioral perspectives on humanism and utopian cultural design, in an attempt to mollify critics from these latter fields. He provides an accurate (if necessarily simplified) summary of those behavioral principles (primarily operant) which are seen as accounting for a large portion of human behavior. Representative quotes from Skinner sprinkle Newman's prose, illustrating the essentially humanitarian perspectives of behaviorism. Newman tries to convince us that Skinner's views (titles such as *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* notwithstanding) are not only benign but possess great potential for realizing the ideals of humanism and utopian thought. He does a nice job at this.

It is apparent to this reviewer that a major sticking point for the critics is their perception that behaviorists disavow the possibility of free will. Both utopians and humanists have a central core belief in the perfectibility of human nature through education and reason. Given a sufficiency of both, people will *want* to behave morally, in a manner tending towards human perfectibility. Of course, this view does not prevent humanists from advocating for legislation (e.g., gun control laws) to enforce proper comportment, or preclude utopians from relying on environmentally-based elements of cultural and physical design to bring about the desired changes in human nature, but this paradox between theory and practice seems to have eluded them. Behavior analytic perspectives on encouraging humane behavior and societal evolution illuminate the role of environmental contingencies in perhaps too bright a light to be comfortably viewed by some.

Readers of this journal know that to focus on contingencies of reinforcement and punishment as particularly crucial elements in accounting for human behavior need not be accompanied by the claim that all other perspectives are irrelevant or useless. Without disavowing any other source of behavioral variation (biological, psychodynamic, etc.), the behaviorist explores operant variables and leaves other fields of investigation to other disciplines (e.g., genetics, physiology, neurology, etc.). To claim that operant variables are important does not assume that free will is non-existent, only that it is not a complete formulation. Although the potential role of free will in understanding human nature has become increasingly circumscribed with scientific advances, it would be propaganda, not science, to assert that free will does not exist. It is an impossible task to prove that any phenomenon, as a class (e.g., ghosts, ESP, God, flying saucers), does not exist. Perhaps we behaviorists need some temperance in making claims beyond our data.

Newman's writings continue to serve as valuable counter controls to misconceptions about the role behavior analysis can play in the design and development of a humane society. It would be desirable for future works along these lines to appear in mainstream publishing outlets where they are more likely to gain the positive attention they deserve.

REVIEW

REFERENCE

Newman, B. (1992). *The reluctant alliance: Behaviorism and humanism*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.