

*Part I:*

The Free Will Problem:  
Standard Positions:  
Compatibilism,  
Libertarianism, Hard and  
Soft Determinism



# Walden Two: Freedom and the Behavioral Sciences

*B. F. Skinner*

## Editor's Introduction

B. F. Skinner was one of the most influential behavioral psychologists of the twentieth century. He argued that the behavior of humans and other animals was most effectively influenced by reward rather than punishment. By rewarding certain behaviors (associating them with pleasant stimuli or the removal of unpleasant stimuli) one could reinforce or increase their frequency. Such principles of "operant conditioning," as Skinner called his methods, were first applied experimentally to pigeons. (He taught pigeons to play table tennis, among other things, by such methods.) But Skinner also believed an effective science of human behavior could be constructed upon such principles and argued for such a science of human behavior throughout his long career.

The passages reprinted here are from Skinner's well-known utopian novel *Walden Two*, published in 1948. *Walden Two* is a rural community situated in a lush valley in which the principles of Skinner's behavioral psychology are put into practice. The citizens live in apartment buildings that are something like dormitories or co-ops; they eat in communal dining halls and farm the land organically to support themselves. (Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* was very much on Skinner's mind when he wrote *Walden Two*. Self-reliance and attunement with nature are everywhere in evidence, but not for an individual alone as in Thoreau's *Walden*, rather for a whole community.) Children are reared by the community of *Walden Two* in accordance with the principles of operant conditioning to be model citizens, by reward rather than punishment. Thus there is no need for punishment in *Walden Two* and no need for coercion or forcing people to do things against their will. People are free to do

whatever they want – because they have been behaviorally conditioned to want what they can do. But Skinner thinks that is a small price to pay for such freedom and happiness. They have to work on average only four hours a day because everyone contributes; and they have a great deal of choice about what work they will do on any given day. If one chooses a nasty job, like cleaning latrines, one only has to work an hour that day; if one chooses an easy job, like sitting in the entrance booth to greet visitors while reading a book, one might have to work eight hours. There is thus plenty of leisure in Walden Two which is given over to the pursuit of the arts and sciences. All in all, it is portrayed as a very pleasant place.

The novel revolves around a visit to Walden Two by a professor of psychology at a local college, named Burris (who is the narrator of the novel). Burris takes along with him four of his psychology students, two young men and two young women, and a colleague of his at the college, a professor of philosophy, named Castle. The visitors are shown around Walden Two by a fellow named Frazier, who is a psychologist and founder of Walden Two. Frazier is an obvious mouthpiece for Skinner. He defends Walden Two and the beliefs on which it is based against the objections of the visitors, especially those of Castle. In the passage reprinted here Castle suggests that Walden Two is a “fascist state” completely controlled by behavioral engineers. Frazier argues to the contrary that Walden Two is the “freest place on earth.” Most of the citizens don’t even know Frazier founded the place. He has no more privileges or power than any other citizen.

This lively debate between Frazier and Castle raises many important questions about free will. It is worth noting that, at the end of the novel, the psychology professor Burris and two of the students decide to stay in Walden Two. Castle, with his “outdated” philosophical views, leaves in disgust. (His very name suggests a medieval view of things.) And two of the students decide to leave because they will not give up their “middle-class” way of life.

#### B. F. Skinner Selections from *Walden Two*

“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? Suppose 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 methods 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 psychologist 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, very much out of countenance.

"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. The legality is usually an assumption – but none the less important in judging the issue at hand."

"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 professorial 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."

"I'm certainly not an advocate of force," said Castle. "But I can't agree that it's not effective."[...]

"Now, early forms of government are naturally based on punishment. It's the obvious technique when the physically strong control the weak. But we're in the throes of a great change to positive reinforcement – from a competitive society in which one man's reward is another man's punishment, to a cooperative society in which no one gains at the expense of anyone else.

"The change is slow and painful because the immediate, temporary effect of punishment overshadows the eventual advantage of positive reinforcement. We've all seen countless instances of the temporary effect of force, but clear evidence of the effect of not using force is rare. That's why I insist that Jesus, who was apparently the first to discover the power of refusing to punish, must have hit upon the principle by accident. He certainly had none of the experimental evidence which is available to us today, and I can't conceive that it was possible, no matter what the man's genius, to have discovered the principle from casual observation."

"A touch of revelation, perhaps?" said Castle.



"No, accident. Jesus discovered one principle because it had immediate consequences, and he got another thrown in for good measure."

I began to see light.

"You mean the principle of 'love your enemies'?" I said.

"Exactly! To 'do good to those who spitefully use you' has two unrelated consequences. You gain the peace of mind we talked about the other day. Let the stronger man push you around – at least you avoid the torture of your own rage. *That's* the immediate consequence. What an astonishing discovery it must have been to find that in the long run you could *control the stronger man* in the same way!"

"It's generous of you to give so much credit to your early colleague," said Castle, "but why are we still in the throes of so much misery? Twenty centuries should have been enough for one piece of behavioral engineering."

"The conditions which made the principle difficult to discover made it difficult to teach. The history of the Christian Church doesn't reveal many cases of doing good to one's enemies. To inoffensive heathens, perhaps, but not enemies. One must look outside the field of organized religion to find the principle in practice at all. Church governments are devotees of *power*, both temporal and bogus."

"But what has all this got to do with freedom?" I said hastily.

Frazier took time to reorganize his behavior. He looked steadily toward the window, against which the rain was beating heavily.

"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 cultural 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.

“We have no vocabulary of freedom in dealing with what we want to do,” Frazier went on. “The question never arises. When men strike for freedom, they strike against jails and the police, or the threat of them – against oppression. They never strike against forces which make them want to act the way they do. Yet, it seems to be understood that governments will operate only through force or the threat of force, and that all other principles of control will be left to education, religion, and commerce. If this continues to be the case, we may as well give up. A government can never create a free people with the techniques now allotted to it.

“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.”

Frazier threw himself back upon the bed and stared at the ceiling.

### **Comments and Questions on B. F. Skinner: “Walden Two: Freedom and the Behavioral Sciences”**

1. Frazier claims that Walden Two is the “freest place on earth” while Castle thinks it lacks any freedom whatsoever. To Castle, it is a thor-

oughly fascist or totalitarian state. They seem to be operating with different notions of freedom. How would you define what each of them means by freedom? Who do you side with in this debate – Frazier or Castle? Which one is right about the freedom of Walden Two? Or are both of them right, or both wrong?

2. If we had a science of human behavior at our disposal, says Frazier, and we knew what the good life was, why shouldn't we use that science to make the good life available to all and make people happy? But what is "the good life," asks Castle at another point in the novel, and who is to decide what the good life is for other people? Isn't this issue of knowing the good life the missing link in Frazier's program of behavioral control? Frazier responds: "Of course, I know nothing about your course in ethics, but the philosopher in search of a rational basis for deciding what is good has always reminded me of the centipede trying to decide how to walk. Simply go ahead and walk! We all know what's good, until we stop to think about it." Frazier goes on to say that "the good life" consists of five things: (a) good health, (b) a minimum amount of unpleasant labor, (c) a chance to exercise one's talents and abilities, (d) intimate and satisfying personal relations and (e) plenty of leisure (and Walden Two affords all of them). He concludes: "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." That experimental justification is Walden Two itself which is a kind of scientific experiment showing us what the good life can be like. Is this an adequate answer to Castle's question about what the good life is and who is to decide what it is? It is difficult to deny that we all want a good measure of the five things Frazier mentions as ingredients of the good life. So has he adequately defined the Good Life? And how, if at all, is this question about the Good Life – and who decides what it is – connected to the issue of free will?

3. It is an interesting exercise to compare Skinner's *Walden Two* to other famous dystopian works of the twentieth century such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984*. Interestingly enough, Orwell was writing *1984* in 1948, the same year as *Walden Two*. Orwell simply inverted the last two digits of that date to get 1984. Skinner would argue that Huxley's *Brave New World* and the society of Orwell's *1984* really are fascist or totalitarian states in the worst sense of those terms. *Brave New World* depicts a hierarchical society in which elites rule over lower-echelon workers who are controlled by drugs. By contrast, *Walden Two* is an egalitarian society in which everyone has a rich and

lively personal life. Orwell's 1984 society is a police state in which all thought and behavior is monitored by the powers that be and misbehavior is severely punished. By contrast, there is no punishment in *Walden Two* and no coercion. Thus the objectionable features of *Brave New World* and *1984* are not to be found in *Walden Two*, Skinner would argue. So one can't object to *Walden Two* as one might object to these other utopian societies. Is Skinner right about this? A suggested exercise is to read all three novels and test your answer further.

### Suggested Reading

Skinner's views are further developed in a philosophical work, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971). Bruce Waller's *Freedom Without Responsibility* (1990) is an interesting defense of some of Skinner's ideas about free will and responsibility by a philosopher. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* ([1932] 1989) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) are well-known dystopian novels that can be usefully compared to (and contrasted with) *Walden Two*.