

2006

B. F. Skinner

Rodger K. Bufford

George Fox University, rbufford@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac

 Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bufford, Rodger K., "B. F. Skinner" (2006). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. 307.
https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/307

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Clinical Psychology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

He attended Hamilton College and planned a literary career, but soon enrolled in *psychology, completing his PhD at Harvard in 1931. Skinner taught at the University of Minnesota, Indiana University and also Harvard.

The father of modern behavioural psychology, Skinner is known for his emphasis on behaviour rather than mental processes. Considered the most prominent American psychologist of the twentieth century, Skinner sought to control, predict and interpret behaviour. He disliked formal theory and emphasized single-subject rather than group research. Skinner showed that most animal and human behaviour was operant rather than respondent, i.e. controlled by its consequence rather than elicited by the environment. He developed the Skinner Box, the cumulative recorder and the first teaching machines.

A prolific writer, Skinner published nineteen books. Perhaps most influential are *The Behavior of Organisms* (1935), an initial presentation of his theory and philosophy; *Science and Human Behavior* (1953), which applied his theory to everyday human activities; and *Verbal Behavior* (1957), his approach to cognition and experience. He also wrote extensively about his life and career. Skinner helped found the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* and the Division of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior in the American Psychological Association.

Skinner espoused materialistic humanism and was a signatory to the *Humanist Manifesto II. Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971) articulated Skinner's philosophy of social systems, *ethics and religion. Skinner viewed moral behaviour as simply the way a person had been taught to behave. At times Skinner's humanistic views seemed to shape his scientific conclusions, e.g. he concluded that punishment had harmful effects and did not work, a view others challenged.

Critics charged that Skinner reduced men to dehumanized robots without freedom or personal responsibility, undermined morals, fostered totalitarianism by his emphasis on control of human behaviour and confused his personal philosophy with psychology. He responded to his critics, most extensively in *Answers for My Critics* (in Wheeler, 1973).

Though a determinist, Skinner proposed that humans control their own destiny: 'Man himself may be controlled by his environment, but it is an environment which is almost wholly

SKINNER, B. F.

Born in 1904 in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, and son of a lawyer, B. F. Skinner (1904–90) was raised in a middle-class Protestant family.

of his own making.' Thus he ended up advocating a view similar to that of *causality and responsible choice, a view held by many Christians. Though many view Skinner's religious perspectives as central to behaviour theory, behaviour theory need not embrace Skinner's world-view.

Skinner received many honours and over twenty honorary degrees. He was a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Royal Society of Arts and member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the New York Academy of Sciences, among others.

Bibliography

R. K. Bufford, *The Human Reflex: Behavioral Psychology in Biblical Perspective* (New York, 1981); M. P. Cosgrove, *B. F. Skinner's Behaviorism* (Grand Rapids, 1982); J. G. Holland, 'B. F. Skinner (1904–1990)', *American Psychologist*, 47 (1992), pp. 665–667; J. A. Weigel, *B. F. Skinner* (Boston, 1977); H. Wheeler (ed.), *Beyond the Punitive Society* (San Francisco, 1973).

R. K. BUFFORD