Q: Dr. Skinner, what sort of philosophical notions about behavior did you initially entertain?

A: I first heard about Behaviorism from Bertrand Russell, who reviewed Ogden and Richards' *Meaning of Meaning* in the *Dial*. Russell ended the review by saying that he had been very much influenced by "Dr. Watson," whose book *Behaviorism* he regarded as "massively impressive." Russell was, of course, a great authority at that time, and so I began to look at Behaviorism. I also read Russell's *Philosophy*, which, according to his biographer, was dashed off at speed for the American market. At the beginning of the book he has five or six chapters on Watson. It was really epistemology, and I went into Behaviorism looking for a theory of knowledge. I knew nothing about psychology. I had never had a course on the subject. I thought Behaviorism was psychology. I was disabused of that notion when I got to Harvard, where I found Boring writing a history of the subject.

Q: Was it easy for you to be deterministic in your approach to the study of behavior?

A: I don't know whether it ever bothered me. I'm trying to trace that out right now in my autobiography. Anything I say here will be more of a guess than what I hope to say there. I have always believed in some kind of determinism. I was very much a Presbyterian until late puberty, when I became an agnostic, and Presbyterians believe in predestination. Are you free if God knows what you're going to do? Cotton Mather referred to that very issue. He said we believe in free will because we know our behavior but don't know its causes. So, we think that we cause it, and that was something I debated. It has never bothered me in the least to accept myself as a completely determined system. I used to play with a notion of intellectual suicide — the mind as a product of natural selection destroys mind as an explanation. That's doubletalk, but there is a point in it I expect to make at the end of my fourth volume. There is a kind of intellectual suicide in the sense that an analysis of behavior moves toward a conception in which there is no functional I — no capital I.

Q: When you wrote your paper on operationism in the 40's, was it fairly easy for you to avoid getting caught up in the logical positivism prevailing at that time?

A: Yes. You see, I wasn't a logical positivist. I don't know why so many people think that I was. I was not a Comtean positivist either. Comte was a kind of structuralist, and according to that view only what can be observed matters, and that means the physical world. That ruled out sensation, perception, instinct, personality, drive — all those things inside that were (supposedly) causing organisms to behave. But as I made clear in my 1945 paper — and this was, I think, one of my more important papers — we do observe private events, and the fact that no two people can observe them doesn't make them any less real. But we can only know things because of contingencies of reinforcement, and the only contingencies that permit us to know ourselves are verbal — arranged by other people. I react to changes in my blood pressure; if I didn't, I wouldn't be alive, but that reaction is not knowing my blood pressure, any more than looking at a picture because it attracts my attention is knowing the picture. To know yourself, as to know anything about the physical world, you need special verbal contingencies. That is where a theory of knowledge comes into the picture. What I pointed out in my 1945 paper was that there are always inaccuracies in the contingencies that lead you to know yourself, so you never fully know it, and no one else ever fully trusts you when you report it. They cannot maintain sufficiently precise contingencies.

Q: What I hear you saying is that it was your psychological work that led you to take certain stands on particular philosophical issues.

A: Well, I came around full circle, more or less. I started off puzzled by what it means "to know." By 1945, I had long since abandoned a stimulus-response psychology, and I was well along with my book on verbal behavior. I wrote the 1945 paper just after spending a year on my verbal behavior manuscript. As a matter of fact, it was a section of that manuscript which I touched up to fit that particular issue of *Psychological Review*. With a functional analysis of verbal behavior based upon the discriminative stimulus instead of the eliciting stimulus — with, in other words, an analysis of verbal contingencies of reinforcement — I found what I believe it means to know.

Q: In your classes in philosophy did you ever get caught up in the old Berkeleyan Idealism? Did you ever take that in a serious way?

A: No, I never did. By 1929-30, I had Bridgman's *Logic of Modern Physics*, which is not logical positivism; nor is it really operationism. It made me skeptical of things like "essences." I was amazed to see a recent article about a brilliant new philosopher which goes into the "essence" of a tiger; the meaning of a tiger is said to be its essence. Well, that kind of nonsense goes back hundreds of years.

Q: I would like to clarify a couple of points. I believe I heard you once say that the philosophy of science is the verbal behavior of philosophers. Do you recall saying that?

A: No. It sounds like a pretty poor play on words. I knew some people in the Vienna Circle. I knew Herbet Feigl quite well; Carnap only slightly. To me the philosophy of science simply means the philosophical issues which are raised by science, and they are essentially psychological issues. What can the scientist do? I think the whole question of physics today about what is "really there" should be analyzed in terms of what scientists are able to do about the world, given the present ways in which they observe it. To say that something is both a wave and a particle is simply fudging. No one likes to say it, but at the moment we have to do so. That is, to me, an issue in the philosophy of science, and it's an issue about what physicists are actually doing.

Q: How would you respond to the statement that determinism is a metaphysical assumption?

A: I don't know anything about the metaphysical. I live in a physical world and that is what I am always talking about. I avoid words which have too vague a reference. I certainly cannot say that I can precisely define every word I use, but I avoid talk which merely reinforces talking because of its pleasant consequences. You can spin theories which are essentially poetry and have the same effect.
Q: Do you see operant conditioning as close to any existing philosophical system?
A: I have been reading a fascinating book called *Key Words*, which analyzes the history of many central words, especially in the social sciences. The word "pragmatism," for example, has had many different meanings in different epochs. It first meant paying attention to the consequences of our actions. Later Charles Sanders Pierce applied this notion of consequences to what we call "ideas" or "concepts." The totality of an idea or concept is the totality of its consequences or effects. The method of Pierce was to consider all the effects a concept might conceivably have on practical matters. The whole of our conception of an object or event is our conception of its effects. That is very close. I think, to an operant analysis of the way in which we respond to stimuli. The totality of our knowledge or our description of a stimulus is what happens when we respond to it. You don't form a concept in your head; the concept is in the object or event. According to *Key Words*, William James missed the point of all this, and began with practical action — with doing something — which was one of the early meanings of pragmatic or pragmatism. I think Pierce was right. He was not a positivist. I liked this quotation, "It is certain that the questions Pierce asked would stop any ordinary pragmatist dead in his tracts." Pierce was talking about knowledge shaped by consequences. That is, I think, the position we have arrived at experimentally; Pierce came to it from philosophical speculation.

Q: Some people have defined the application of operant conditioning as simply pragmatism. Would you agree with that?
A: The word pragmatic in the sense of the business of life, of the practical things we do, came from another word meaning business. A focus on the practical consequences of action is, of course, behavior modification. There is no doubt that if you take the consequences of action to be your defining point, then your emphasis is going to be on consequences; and when it is reinforcing to produce certain kinds of consequences, the behavior that produces them is strengthened. By designing a system which makes consequences effective, a person can produce certain kinds of behaviors. The possibility is just as subject to misuse as the possibility that a person who is big enough and has a whip can make another person work for him.

Q: A behavior modification system that works in a pragmatic sense may still be subject to criticism for other reasons. For example, a prison system that effectively shapes and maintains inmate compliance to the narrow or selfish interests of the custodial staff is clearly objectionable. Now, would not we have to go beyond mere pragmatics when evaluating a system of this sort?
A: I can think of a very good answer, but it’s an answer that people seem to have a great deal of trouble with. First, we must always look at consequences. But if we distinguish between immediate and ultimate consequences — between what works in the short run and what works in the long run — we may preserve our pragmatic emphasis on consequences while avoiding its seemingly distasteful implications. The important thing for any system is its ultimate consequences. Do the practices of a system have the ultimate consequence of promoting the strength or survival of that system? You always have to look at consequences, and the ultimate consequence has to do with the survival of a way of life. The prison system you describe does not have the same beneficial consequences for all participants in the system, and for that reason it does not have the ultimate consequence of promoting the strength — and hence the survival — of the whole system. And a system that emphasizes the production and stockpiling of nuclear weapons is not likely to have the ultimate consequences of promoting its survival. Its potential for overkill jeopardizes not only the system itself, but the entire human species and all other species living on the face of the earth. I don’t feel particularly sorry for the poor and unemployed because they are miserable; I don’t like to see people poor and unemployed because their condition is a threat to the American way of life, by which I mean a way of life defined by constitutional guarantees against certain kinds of political tyranny or despotism. That is a better reason for doing something about people who are unemployed and poor than being a "bleeding heart." I don’t act because I feel sorry for people; I act because of what their miserable condition is doing to everybody. I take everybody into account rather than a particular person or group.

Q: You do not, then, discount the poor and miserable; you simply emphasize the important reasons which lead you to try to change their condition. Is that correct?
A: Yes. The important thing is the whole group, and not just a part of it. The unemployed are wasted in the sense that they are making no contribution to their culture. Unfortunately, they are not making a contribution because measures that would permit them to do so would be considered socialism. You can presumably take the unemployed and employ them at producing some of the things they are given by welfare institutions, but that would be government in business, and it would be called socialism. Yet, that is the kind of thing a culture would do if it really took its own future into serious account. The unemployed not only do not produce what they consume, they are a threat in other ways. For example, they cause the employed to be fearful about unemployment. All of this disturbs the functioning of a way of life and, hence, reduces the chances that the way of life will have a future. I think every national issue can be reduced to this: Is a system benefiting the nation as a whole by enabling it to solve its problems and survive? The question applies to the system’s governmental practices, to its business practices, to its labor union practices, to its educational practices, and so on. In each case, a group of people is given the power to control the contingencies of reinforcement which control the behavior of others. But the behavior of the controlling group itself is controlled by other contingencies. And because none of these contingencies are carefully and explicitly designed to induce people to behave for the good of the whole group, it is difficult to prevent the reinforcement of selfish partisan behaviors. As a result, we have graft, corruption, and other kinds of objectionable behavior. Frazier makes this point in *Walden Two*. Those who manage to get into power are no better than those they have thrown out. The reason is that both behave under the same contingencies of reinforcement.

Q: The answer, then, is to design contingencies which will control behavior effectively for the good of the whole society. Now in *The Behavior of Organisms* you indicated little concern about extrapolations from your work. Why was this?
A: In that book I simply said "Let him extrapolate who will," but I was already extrapolating myself. I just didn’t want to get into it in that book. Seven years later I wrote *Walden Two*, which pictured some possible technological applications of an experimental analysis of behavior. With very few exceptions, I have never used operant conditioning to modify the behavior of my family or friends. But the kind of things that could be done were obvious, and in *Walden Two*...
Two I sketched a wide range of applications to society.

Q: Do you see contemporary Walden Two type communities as basically experiments that the larger community should emulate?
A: The present communities are too small, of course, to be very much like Walden Two. Yet I think they have done very well. They started from nothing; they never had any endowments. They have created capital. I don’t know the value of the present holdings of Twin Oaks but it must run at least into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, perhaps millions. They have a great deal of land, buildings, heavy equipment, and so on, and they have acquired or produced all this themselves. It is not surprising that, like Russia, they haven’t had much time for the production of consumer goods and the enjoyment of leisure. Still, they seem to be on the way. Recently I had a letter from a person who had been at East Wind and who was visiting Los Horcones in Mexico. He urged me to come to see the community because it was really following the principles of Walden Two. And I think it is. I have talked to several people who have been there, and they all seem to agree.

A: In what ways has Twin Oaks departed from the Walden Two model?
A: For one thing, they are not all interested in applying behavioral principles in controlling their behavior. Some members have preferred meditation, for example. Some of their governing practices follow a democratic rather than a planner-manager pattern. I understand that East Wind tried an experiment recently in which, for a period of time, they decided everything on the basis of a full consensus. That is the way all social practices should be approached; they should be tried as experiments.

Q: What advantages do you see in a small utopian, Walden Two type community as compared with a large, mass society?
A: There are many immediate advantages of living in a small group. In a governmental sense, people can control each other by direct confrontation with verbal expressions of approval and censure instead of with a police force. In an economic sense, people can produce and barter or exchange goods and services directly, instead of having "businesses." Smallness, as Schumacher pointed out, has many advantages that should be studied and taken seriously.

But the ultimate advantage and the most important value of a small community is that it must continually be aware of the question, "Is it going to work?" You can ask that about Twin Oaks, say, in a way that you would never ask it about America. In a large mass society we just assume that somehow we’ll muddle through. We lose sight of the important question of whether our governmental, economic, and educational practices are contributing maximally to our survival. We’re not concerned about survival, whereas at Twin Oaks they must be. They must be concerned about keeping their members there, producing the goods they consume with a small surplus to meet emergencies, and maintaining good relations with each other, being peaceful and cooperative, and so on. The goal of survival, which I think is the ultimate value in all decisions about the design of a culture, is very conspicuous in a small community. It is almost entirely lacking, however, in a larger one.

Q: What, in your view, determines the rules or laws of a society — or what Jerry Ullman calls the macro-contingencies of society? And how does one go about trying to change those laws when they are inadequate or unjust?
A: The important things to keep in mind are the consequences of a given law or social practice rather than whether or not you like the law or practice. Feelings, like sympathy and compassion, are what have led people to make social reforms, but for the wrong reasons. The important reason is that a given practice or set of practices must be reformed because it is a threat to the survival of the culture. If a practice creates a situation which arouses compassion, then it is quite appropriate to permit yourself to feel compassion, but don’t act because of this. Act because the objectionable practice jeopardizes the future of the group. In a small community, a practice that threatens the culture with extinction is quickly noticed and generates immediate remedial action. That doesn’t happen in America. Getting people to behave in ways which will give our world a chance to have a future is something we do badly.

Q: But what should be done when the contingencies of survival of one subgroup in a culture conflict with the contingencies of survival of another subgroup? For example, suppose that the survival of pesticide manufacturers is contingent upon the continued use of pesticides in agriculture, while the survival of consumers is contingent upon the abandonment of pesticides. How should issues of this sort be decided?
A: First of all, in the long run both subgroups in the culture are either going to survive together or perish together. The value of cultural survival applies equally to all subgroups. If the use of dangerous pesticides is necessary only for certain people to make a profit, then it is obvious that their use should be abandoned. But if their use is absolutely necessary if sufficient food is to be produced to prevent starvation, then a decision must be made on the basis of whether the pesticides or starvation is the greater threat to everyone’s survival.

Q: Let us consider a somewhat different situation — such as gasoline rationing or such as increasing the price of gasoline to three dollars a gallon. This might be good for one group of people, but bad for another. What criteria should we use to decide an issue of this sort?
A: Here, again, I don’t think we should ask whether a given practice or policy is fair to one group or unfair to another; instead we should ask whether it is fair to every member of the group.

Q: Do you see culture as a set of contingencies of reinforcement which is shared by everyone living in it?
A: The word culture is obviously doing too much work here. I should have said a "nation" practicing certain principles of government, economics, and so on. And I suppose I mean other nations like it. One characteristic practice of the various nations which comprise what we call Western Civilization is that of changing practice. We test practices against the problems they are designed to solve, and adopt those which work and discard those which don’t. We do that when we talk about a way of life that we hope will survive. It is close to the experimental practice underlying science, and we need to extend it to all fields in human affairs. When one small group is doing things that injure another small group, I want to ask what is being done to everybody — to the nation or way of life as a whole.

Q: If one group is injuring another group by threatening it with guns, how do we convince the group with guns that it should not do that?

*E.F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful (1973)*
A: It is an engineering or technological problem. Obviously a good solution would be to change the system so that guns are not available. There are plenty of problems there, of course. But in acting to make any such change, it should not be because we feel sorry for the people who are being threatened but because a nation in which people use guns on other people is then weaker as a nation and, in the long run, less likely to survive.

Q: I think what I'm driving at is the case of a nation in which some people have a very positively reinforcing way of life, while others have a way of life that is negatively reinforcing or punishing. For example, the way of life led by most college professors is comfortable and rewarding, while the way of life led by most farmworkers, welfare people, and so on is not very comfortable or rewarding. What can be done to create a positively reinforcing way of life for all?

A: That is no doubt an important problem, and I'm not sure how to go about solving it. It involves every aspect of social life — governmental, economic, educational, and so on. I'm merely trying to make clear why I want things changed and, once in a position to do so, what some of the things are that might be tried. The problem of putting the right people in positions where they could effectively test such proposals is a question for which no easy answer is available.

Q: But you have long argued the case for designing a society in which all citizens would be happy, healthy, productive, creative, and so on. And many of us are quite convinced that we now have the behavioral technology available that is necessary for constructing this kind of society. Now the problem many of us are struggling with is that of analyzing and understanding the specific reinforcement contingencies which are preventing this technology from being applied to society as a whole for the good of all. Wouldn't you agree that we must start by examining the contingencies which control the people who are making the basic social decisions?

A: Yes, I think so. The behavior of a person who gets into power comes under the control of contingencies involving control over other people. If these contingencies are not designed to reinforce behavior that works for the good of all, for the good of the group as a whole, then we get the social problems we have today. The problem in the design of a governmental system is to combine contingencies under which governing behavior has long-term effects. So far, we have not done a very good job.

An interesting possibility has to do with the contingencies maintained by various agencies. Contingencies in government and economics need to be maintained indefinitely. You don't arrest people once or twice for violating the law and then stop arresting them because they then behave lawfully. And you don't pay a person for working a month or so and then stop paying him because he continues to work for nothing. You have to maintain the contingencies. In education and psychotherapy, however, you must terminate the contingencies. If you are successful, people continue to behave according to the earlier contingencies in education and therapy. If you can't terminate the contingencies, you haven't finished the job. A therapist is not successful if his clients keep coming back for help, and a teacher is not successful if his students keep coming back for further instruction. Could a culture use education and, to some extent, counseling, to produce people who will work with pleasure not only because they are getting paid but because they want to work, the work activity itself being reinforcing? Could a culture produce people who behave well even though they are no longer threatened with punishment, good behavior itself being reinforcing? If people never had to be paid for working or punished for misbehaving, they would be much better off, provided no one else profited from their labor and good behavior. That is a kind of utopian dream, but something like it has been done in some cultures in the past. A technology under which people work carefully and diligently in the absence of sharp economic contingencies is not far from the "Protestant Work Ethic." I want to see people work and behave well, and not because they have to work and behave well. (And not, of course, so that others gain from what they do.)

Q: The capitalist or profit system has been broadly defined as a behavioral technology which motivates people on the basis of competition for scarce reinforcers. Do you think a scientific behavioral technology can eventually become so powerful that society will be able to dispense with competition and unequal rewards as motivating devices and achieve the same or even better results while using social practices based on cooperation and equal rewards?

A: I should hope so, but there are questions that worry me. It is important to arrange conditions which will lead to fresh discoveries, new inventions. Progress is a new idea. It is a central feature of our way of life that I hope to see preserved. It seems likely, however, that many inventions and discoveries would never have been made if it were not for some kind of competition, as exemplified by private enterprise and war. That is small consolation for the victims of capitalism and war, and I certainly don't favor either war or powerful private enterprises. But it is hard to deny that remarkable technological advances have been made in America under the profit system. I'm sure they are not as likely to be made in countries like Russia or China. A powerful technology of behavior, however, may change all this. A technology may become so powerful that we shall at least duplicate the advantages of private enterprises without having to resort to unequal rewards. I should like to see people strongly motivated to discover and invent because these actions will be rewarding in themselves. A technology that can arrange schedules of reinforcement which produce powerful and sustained inventing and discovering may eventually make competitive or profit incentives unnecessary.

Q: As a culture, then, we need to preserve our gains and make further advances by solving our problems in a way that will maximize our chances for survival. And to do this, our most important assignment is to vastly accelerate the development of a science and technology of human behavior. Is this an essentially accurate statement of your position?

A: Yes, that's my position exactly.

Q: What, in your view, are some of the most important problems facing our country?

A: The single most important problem everywhere is population. If we could achieve zero population growth, most of our other problems would be much easier to solve. Apart from this, I would cite inflation and unemployment as two important problems. The difference in quality of life between people at the top and at the bottom is an important problem. So is the fact that our culture has failed to design and implement reinforcement contingencies under which people behave in ways in which they feel free and worthy.

Q: I would like to dwell for a moment on an issue related to the difference in quality of life between the upper and lower classes of our society. What is your view of the fact that presidents, senators, congressmen, and boards of directors
don’t live under the same reinforcement contingencies as the vast majority of the people?

A: The solution, I think, is to design a government that limits power in ways which minimize the chances that it will be misused. The Walden Two pattern is a plausible model. The planner or governor has a limited term of office, after which he returns to a nongoverning position. The planner has no time to divert the proceeds of community labor for his own use, and he is faced with the fact that any legislation which might favor his interests as a planner will eventually work to his disadvantage later. The fact that the planners in Walden Two have no police or military agency to enforce the laws they enact offers further protection against a despotic takeover. It would be very difficult to arrange something like that in America; here, again, we see an important advantage in a small community.

Q: Some people believe that the contingencies under which the planners in America live tend to engineer behaviors such as declarations of war, certain levels of unemployment, and things of that nature. What is your view of this?

A: I have never been impressed by the notion of conspiracy. I doubt very much that people in positions to control conspire to make war in order to profit from it. But I do think that certain contingencies raise the probability that such people will engage in joint action that leads to war. There is a kind of conspiracy which resembles that in which people raise prices on commodities when they are in short supply. It is joint action arising from common contingencies. Related to this is the additional problem of lobbies or special interest groups which exert pressure on Congress to enact laws or implement policies which serve selfish or partisan interests but which pose an overall threat to the nation. As my friend, Ken Galbraith, points out, we don’t really have a free market. Nor do we have a government by free representatives of the people. Whenever a candidate’s success is in some way contingent upon the support of special groups, those groups have undue weight in deciding the outcome of an election. The enormous cost of conducting a campaign opens up the whole field to bribery, because candidates almost necessarily make promises to get the money needed to run for office.

Q: The Paris Commune had a provision that officials could be immediately recalled at any time by a majority vote of the people. Do you think this is a good direction in which to move as a means of controlling the behavior of the controllers?

A: No, because the official would then be subject to the actions of groups inventing spurious reasons for a recall. We should be faced with all the problems of propaganda, false advertising, and so on. Free marks and free elections will not be assured simply by some kind of majority rule.

Q: Those of us who are convinced that behavior is controlled by contingencies of reinforcement are looking for ways to produce meaningful social change. The whole object of Behaviorists for Social Action is to become involved in changing society. Now in the early days of the Soviet Union, there was a rule that Communist party members could make no more in wages than the average blue collar worker. Under these contingencies, we would expect certain kinds of behavior from Communist party members. That rule was later changed to make wages commensurate with the jobs of party members. Under these changed contingencies, we would expect the behavior of party members to also change. Now if we can expect officials in this country to behave according to the contingencies under which they function, it seems necessary that we begin to design and arrange the contingencies that will produce the desired leadership behavior. And what we want to do is get people interested in government in the sense that they will become actively involved in a movement which has as its avowed purpose the design and construction of contingencies that will effectively control the behavior of governors in the interest of the governed. Do you have any ideas on how we might get people interested in this objective?

A: I’m a strong believer in education. I should like to see schools and colleges create highly informed and skilled people who will understand and act upon the problems we now face. This includes the problems generated by capitalist reinforcement contingencies. I don’t think that people who are effectively educated with respect to social issues will see any legitimate reason for millionaires. Very little of that compensation has any bearing on services to society. A similar kind of understanding should be reached with respect to the practice of politics. Recently I was on a radio program with a congressman who repeatedly referred to himself as a politician. To me a politician is a person who is concerned solely with getting into and holding public office. What has happened to the word statesman? The ability to get into office and stay there is not the same as the ability to govern effectively for the good of the governed. But perhaps the congressman was right. Today the average congressman and senator is controlled mainly by political contingencies. The opinions of the electorate are polled to provide information that might be useful not in deciding social issues, but in getting re-elected. If the contingencies which govern political behavior are more powerful than the contingencies that govern statesman-like behavior, then it is difficult to see how congressmen and senators can effectively deliberate on issues of state.

Once a number of people are sufficiently educated to recognize these and other social problems, the question arises as to how they should act. I want to change the existing social structure so that it functions better for all of us. A nonpolitical evolutionary approach might begin with a small core of people who are highly informed with respect to both existing social problems and behavioral principles. The small core would organize, not to achieve political power, but to make changes bit by bit in the social units to which they have access. Such an elite (for that is what it is) may not seem compatible with democracy. But I don’t believe that the American people as individuals know any more than you or I about how to get out of the dangerous situations in which we all find ourselves. I think it is possible to begin with a small core of knowledgeable people who could make piecemeal changes which in time would gradually spread throughout the entire system. Walden Two was based on the utopian method of changing the entire system at once rather than bit by bit, but with improvements in educational and counseling techniques, we should be able to produce people who will be increasingly more effective in designing and managing their lives. As this sort of nonpolitical reform at the personal and interpersonal levels becomes more and more widespread, it may eventually affect the nation’s economic and governmental practices. In this way, better methods of producing and governing may gradually be evolved. I think we can move in that direction. Ralph Nader and Common Cause have had some success in getting small groups of people to act on certain issues, but I don’t much admire the way they operate. Still, it may be an approach that could serve as an alternative to an active socialist or
The object would not be to bring about a radical change all at once, but to move from group to group, changing social practices one by one, until the entire system is reformed.

Q: The Chinese Communists have emphasized the issue of moral versus material incentives. What is your view of this issue?
A: Morals and ethics presumably refer to consequences which are good for the culture. If the Chinese can put this over, they will be ahead of us because they will be generating behavior that takes the future of their culture into account. The success of this undertaking will depend, of course, on the power of their educational techniques.

Q: Marxists talk about raising the consciousness of people. Is this approximately what you mean by education?
A: I don’t think anybody’s consciousness is ever raised. In traditional usage, the word consciousness is simply an explanatory fiction — a fanciful cause of behavior. What you are really doing is raising behavior, so to speak, by improving reinforcement contingencies which control it. Marx was speaking of something like this: You show workers that they are being exploited by showing how little money they make in comparison with what is made by their employers. You then create an aversive situation so that action will be taken either to destroy it or to escape from it.

Q: By looking at the environment instead of consciousness, do you think fewer mistakes will be made when designing a culture?
A: The whole point of the behaviorist revolution is to draw attention to the environment and away from things inside the skin. Carl Rogers, for example, wants to get inside the person, share experiences, and understand. I want to get outside — to understand how the environment works to make a person behave in a given way.

Q: It was recently reported that J. B. Watson has become sort of a hero in the Soviet Union. Have you heard about that?
A: No, but it wouldn’t surprise me because he used Pavlov’s stimulus-response model to explain behavior. It was the only model available to behavioral science when he wrote his books.

Q: If someone tried to design a culture on the basis of the stimulus-response model, what sorts of mistakes do you think he might make?
A: He would make all sorts of mistakes, because operant behavior isn’t triggered like the respondent behavior upon which the Pavlovian model is based. He would fail to look at the consequences of behavior and the situations to which consequences are tied. That is something Watson never understood. There is nothing in his book Behaviorism about the consequences of behavior. Many people still think that all behaviorists are stimulus-response psychologists, but I gave that up in 1934.

Q: Are you satisfied with the way operant conditioning has progressed over the years?
A: Well, I’d be in a lot of trouble if I said that I’m not. Seriously, though, I’m very happy with the progress that has been and is being made. True, I don’t like a lot of things that are going on in the field. We could change many things about America, but we have never been able to do so because of the rigidity of the establishment. All in all, however, there are good reasons to feel satisfied.

Q: Thank you, Dr. Skinner, for offering your views on these questions.

Note: This interview was edited by R. H. Nicolaus from some very raw tapes. The BFSA Journal staff are especially indebted to him for this outstanding job. The interview was conducted by Joseph E. Morrow, Editor of the BFSA Journal.