Welcome back. Today we are going to begin what will be the last of — the last two lectures in this part of the course on personhood and personal identity. As we’ve done the last two lectures, we’re going to continue with critiques — criticisms of the traditional view of personhood and personal identity which I have described as broadly mentalistic. That is, that the self, the person that I am, is to be identified with my internal mental states and that these mental states are the proximate immediate causes of my voluntary behavior.

We’ve examined one critique of this idea that comes from the philosopher and ordinary language theorist, Gilbert Ryle. Today we’re going to begin what will be two lectures on the critique of B. F. Skinner, probably the most well-known behaviorist/psychologist and beyond psychology an ardent advocate of social engineering along behaviorist lines. In Skinner we really do see a full-fledged assault on the traditional notion of personhood, on mentalistic explanation of human behavior, and more than that a comprehensive proposal for a very new kind of society, a society based on behaviorist notions of human nature and human behavior and a society managed by a kind of behavioral technology. We will touch the surface of all of these issues and give you a nice overview of Skinner’s views on these matters. But, of course, for any sort of deeper knowledge we’ll have to leave that to another course.

These lectures are entitled “A New Science of Man” and it really is an apropos title given Skinner’s sort of foundational ways of thinking and orientation. In order to understand Skinner and to read him correctly, we need to spend a little bit of time talking about the history of science and about the mentality that pervades the history of science and that arises from the history of science. And so I’m gonna say a few words about that in this lecture and I will introduce Skinner, give you a little bit of biographical information, and then we’ll leave the meat and the details of Skinner’s account until the next lecture.
Last time I left you with a list of things to think about which, of course, were things that went to the heart of the details of Skinner’s account. I really should’ve given you those things to think about this time, at the end of this lecture, but there’s no harm done and we’ll get to those more substantive specific issues in the next lecture.

I’d like to begin by just talking about and reminding all of you that the last 500 years have seen a series of almost successive scientific revolutions. That is, the entire landscape of human knowledge has been changed in the last 500 years to a degree and with a drama that is unique and unprecedented. The 1500 years prior saw less innovation, less of an expansion of human knowledge than the previous 500 years. Historians — those who are engaged in the history of ideas, who work in the history of ideas, will tell you that the acquisition of knowledge is accelerating at an exponential rate. That is, it’s not — knowledge does not increase over time, especially scientific knowledge does not increase over time at a steady rate. Rather, at an increasing rate. It’s why it took thousands of years to get a glider up in the air but then only 60-some years to get a man to the moon.

I’m just gonna go through just a brief list of just some of the major scientific revolutions that have happened in the last 500 years. Of course, these are only the most well-known, largest, most sort of ground-breaking revolutions. There are many more than the ones I’m going to list. Of course the granddaddy of them all is the mechanical revolution in physics that took place in the 17th and 18th centuries, the most probably well-known figure of which is Sir Isaac Newton. But, as we discussed in our earlier lectures, included people like Descartes, Galileo, Capurnicus and others.

Of course there was also the revolution in biology in the 29th century — specifically, the rise of evolutionary biology, the most famous proponent of which, of course, is Charles Darwin, which completely changed and revolutionized the way we understand the human organism and the relationship of the human organism to the rest
of the organisms in nature, and the relationship of organisms to the environment.  

Of course, the 19th century also saw the Industrial Revolution which is not in itself a scientific revolution but more is that the application or implementation of the previous mechanical revolution in physics and the Industrial Revolution, of course, entirely transformed the landscape of human life and of human society.  In the 20th century we had the second wave of revolutions in physics, the theories of general and special relativity as well as the theory that’s known as quantum mechanics, and we also had in the 20th century a revolution in medicine which includes among other things the development of antibiotics, the unlocking of the genetic code, and other advances in cellular and molecular biology and in organic chemistry.  So the last years have seen a remarkable transformation in the landscape of human knowledge and specifically scientific knowledge.

As philosophers, we are as interested in the underlying mentality, the underlying sensibility, the underlying sort of ideology — and I don’t mean that in a pejorative sense, but simply in the sense of sort of a larger worldview — that both underlies these revolutions and also is provoked by these revolutions.  That is, there’s a certain mentality both that gives rise to these scientific and technological revolutions and also a mentality which is at the same time fed by the scientific and technological revolutions.  I’m gonna describe the sensibility as a spirit — a spirit of understanding.  That is, a desire to know.  But — and here’s the important but — because, of course, the desire to know is universal, a universal human desire.  Aristotle argued way, way back in 300 B.C. — Aristotle argued that the desire to know is a fundamental human inclination and unites all human beings.  My big but is that the sensibility — the spirit underlying and provoked by the scientific revolutions was not only a desire to understand for its own sake, but a desire to understand for the sake of control over nature and over our own lives.
This cannot be emphasized enough. So much of what the modern era is about is precisely this desire for control, for greater control, not only over our individual and social and political lives but over nature itself. Indeed, this desire for control, I would argue, explains much of the scientific philosophical and political ventures of the modern era. The 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, actually defined enlightenment as, quote, “the end of our self-incurred tutelage,” unquote. That’s not from any reading of yours. It’s a line that’s important to explain what I’m trying to get at with respect to control.

The previous eras of human life — and we’re talking about the west primarily — I mean the eras prior to the first wave of scientific revolutions but prior to the 17th century. So we’re talking about antiquity all the way through the Middle Ages, into the Renaissance. The previous eras were defined, human life was defined, in terms of external control. Because of a lack of science and technology, not only were human beings in a sense at the whim of nature but because of the systems of government, because of the types of societies and polities that people lived in, the individual was also under external social and political control.

And so we can characterize the mentality or the sensibility of people prior to the modern era as one of being under the control of external forces. When Kant talks about enlightenment as representing the end of our self-incurred tutelage, what he means is enlightenment is the process by which we take ourselves out from under the control of others. And specifically in the case of enlightenment, out from under the intellectual control of others, from the control of others over our ideas, over our beliefs, over our ways of life.

But what I would want to argue is that more generally the enlightenment and the modern era at a larger level represents a kind of wholesale revolt on the part of the human individual against all forms of external control, not merely the external control of
other men, other human beings, but also even the external control of nature. The scientific revolution, on the one hand, and modern philosophy, on the other, were both instruments of liberation. They were instruments by which the individual freed him or herself not only from the intellectual and political and social control of other human beings but from the control of nature.

And the best results of this are obvious, right? The best results of this include, for one thing, the emergence and growth of liberal democracies in the west. I mean, the reason why western society today is overwhelmingly liberal — with a small L, meaning a valuing of the individual's prerogatives and rights — and democratic is because of the intellectual revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries, the intellectual revolutions of the modern era. One of the best results of this mentality is, of course, the actual social and political liberation of the western peoples, and it's one that continues to this day. These societies have remained free and democratic for the most part. There, of course, have been terrible interruptions as was the case in the middle of the 20th century with the rise of totalitarianism. But, of course, notice that totalitarianism was defeated. The liberal democratic ideal has prevailed and has persisted.

The other really great result, of course, of this modern mentality, this idea of liberation, has been in modern medicine, specifically in the dramatic increase not only in the human life span and the quality of human life — and I would say if you were to ask me what are the two greatest products of modernity, I would say that these are its greatest products: the social and political liberation of the western peoples and the dramatic increase both in the lifespan and in the quality of life of the western peoples.

And so I'm not in any way going to decry or complain about modernity. This is, of course, a very common cry, a very common complaint that comes from a number of quarters. People complain about many aspects of modern life and I'm going to
complain about certain aspects of it to the extent to which I’m going to express some obvious discontentment with Skinner’s views. But that said, I want to be sort of clear that I overwhelmingly see the modern era as one in which human life is advanced in ways that can only be viewed as positive.

Of course there are always gonna be those for which some is not enough, for which there’s never enough of a good thing. The down side of the desire for liberation and the desire for increasing control over oneself and over one’s environment — the down side, of course, is that that craving for control is never ending. Once you’ve controlled some there’s always going to be people who want to control more. This has been true with respect to the history of the west and what we’re concerned with is the intellectual history of the west. There has been a desire for ever greater control over ourselves and over our environment. Indeed the desire for many has reached the point to which the aim is the complete elimination of all natural and social ills.

Now, probably — or I’m suspecting that most of you in the audience — that most of you who are in the audience have an undamaged common sense. That is, probably most of you realize that social and natural ills are never going to be wholly eliminated, that that sort of Utopianism is simply — misunderstands human nature, the human condition, and sort of the vicissitudes of life. But there is a certain stripe of intellectual which we can call the Utopian who, when they see progress, imagine — can imagine it to its infinite point. That is, there are people — and they’re typically motivated, incidentally, by benevolence. It’s very rare that such people are motivated — have ill motivation or are motivated by malice or malevolence. This is what I’m describing as generally an optimistic attitude. But there is a desire for greater control for the sake of an even greater good than the good that one has already achieved with the control that one has already attained. And so we have this streak or this thread of thought that has always existed in the west and that certainly has always existed in the modern era,
which desires the complete elimination of natural and social ills.

Now, of course, if this is our aim, then it’s not enough simply to control the environment, to control nature. We also have to control people. Because a lot of our natural — a lot of our social ills certainly and even some of our natural ills are the result of human behavior. That is, they’re self-inflicted. And so no amount of science or technology — that is, science that is directed towards the natural world and technology in the sense of tools or instruments — none of those things are going to be sufficient, no matter to what degree you imagine their advancement. None of those things are gonna be sufficient to completely eliminate natural and social ills unless we also find a way to manage human behavior.

So just to give an example that’s a favorite of Skinner’s and it gives you a sense of the times and everything. Where I’m gonna quote from — where I’m reading from is — was written in the 1970s when people were very concerned about this. If we consider over-population to be a problem — and certainly over-population is a problem in some places. It happens not to be a problem in the west. If anything, in the west the problem is under-population. But let’s just stipulate — let’s suppose that we have a major over-population problem. For someone who wants to completely eliminate the problem of over-population, it is obviously not sufficient merely to have developed by way of science advanced birth control and contraceptive technologies. Unless people use the technologies, unless people use the contraceptions, the contraceptions alone are not going to help reduce over-population.

And so if we have utopian ends, if we have the desire to not only sort of increase the quality of human life, increase the life span, better the human condition, but rather perfect it, eliminate all social and natural ills, it will not be sufficient merely to develop our natural and applied sciences. It’s also gonna require that we be capable of managing human life and human behavior. The idea of these people, these Utopians,
was that the knowledge and the methods of modern science — that is, the physics, chemistry, biology and all of the technologies that derive from them — that the methods and knowledge of modern science should be brought to bear on human individual and social life. The idea was that society should be scientifically planned and managed.

Those advocating this point of view are known as technocrats. This is sort of the word that we use to describe such people. Those who think that society should be both scientifically planned and managed for the sake of the betterment of human life, for the sake of the elimination of social and natural ills, we call such people technocrats. The most famous technocrat, I would think, has got to be H. G. Wells. H. G. Wells, of course, was the — late 19th, early 20th century — the great scientific — he was a great popularizer of science. That is, he brought the sciences to the lay audience and to the public through popular writings. He was a well-known and involved social critic as well as a novelist. Along with Jules Verne, Wells is really credited for creating the science-fiction genre.

This very well known public English intellectual and writer, H. G. Wells, was also one of the most prominent technocrats and futurists. He was someone who rigorously in his political and social critical writings was advocating the increasing takeover of social planning and management by scientists and advocating that society should be, in a sense, redesigned and managed under a scientific [inaudible].

It’s interesting — if you step back and think about this, there’s a certain irony in all this, right? We started off with a desire for control over oneself and one’s life. That’s what — so much of modern intellectual endeavors are about is returning control to the individual, control both in the face of social and political authorities, in the face of government, and control in the face of nature. Isn’t it ironic, then, that this desire for control over oneself and one’s life leads back full circle to one’s being controlled by others. Because, of course, when we start talking about the scientific planning and
management of society, what we are talking about, in fact, is the control of society by scientists.

C. S. Lewis, the great 20th century theologian/novelist/essayist/literary scholar — he was a professor at Oxford University for the bulk of his career — Lewis wrote an anti-technocratic manifesto called *The Abolition of Man.* It’s a book I strongly recommend. Lewis wrote — in this book he wrote, quote, “Man’s conquest of nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men. Each new power won by man is a power over man as well,” unquote.

And so I think that there’s a certain irony in the Utopian extension of the initial enlightenment or modern ideal of increased self-control, increased control of the individual over his own life and over his environment. There’s a certain irony in the fact that the logical extension of that idea to its ultimate end — that is, to its Utopian end — actually resubjects individuals to the control of others and to the control of nature by way of science and by way of technology.

Now, other than H. G. Wells, the second most well-known technocrat has got to be B. F. Skinner. Skinner not only was one of the founders of the behaviorist school of psychology, he was an outspoken advocate of the scientifically planned and controlled society, in his case based on behaviorist principles and what Skinner liked to call a technology of behavior. So Skinner, even more so than H. G. Wells, was a public advocate of the scientifically planned society. He wrote two manifestos about this, particularly about the social and political applications of behaviorist psychology and behaviorist technique. The two books are *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* which we will read parts of and talk about in this class and the other is the Utopian novel, *Walden Two* which we will not touch upon in this class.

Skinner believed that in order for a scientifically planned and managed society to
be possible, that we first have to overcome a number of myths — what he calls myths. Obviously, if you don’t agree with his program, they’re not myths to you; they’re truths. But in his case — from his perspective they’re myths. And the myths are three. The first is personhood, the interior self, and more generally the mentalistic model of explanation. Skinner believes that the traditional view of self and identity, the traditional view — the idea that a person is a collection of his own internal mental states and that a person’s behavior, deliberate behavior, is the result of those mental states. Skinner believes that is a myth and it is a myth that hinders our progress in developing a science and technology of human behavior.

The second myth which follows from the first is what Skinner thinks is the myth of the freedom of the will, the idea that the individual person is autonomous. That’s the second myth which Skinner believes interferes with our capacity to develop a science and technology of human behavior. And finally, the third myth, Skinner says, is the myth of human dignity and all the other moral and axiological notions that we attribute to the person, to the self. Axiological simply means evaluative notions, notions of virtue and notions of moral obligation and duty, dignity, and other such notions. Skinner thinks that these notions are products of the traditional view of self and identity and that they too are a hindrance to the development of a scientific culture. Notice one of his two political treatises is titled Beyond Freedom and Dignity. While many of us may be horrified at the thought of what might lie beyond freedom and dignity, Skinner thought it was crucial that we get beyond freedom and dignity in order to get at the truth about human nature and thus on our way towards a scientifically managed and thus, he thinks, perfect society.

So Skinner, in a sense, fundamentally agrees with Locke and with the traditional philosophers of human nature on one thing. He agrees that our notions of prerogative and duty, our axiological concepts, are essentially connected to a conception of
personhood. There he agrees with Locke. Where he disagrees is that he thinks that none of these notions are worth holding onto. That is, the whole cluster of personhood concepts — the whole cluster of concepts that includes self, person, personal identity, freedom, autonomy, dignity, morality, virtue — all of these notions he believes comprise a family of concepts and all of them, he thinks, are useless. Indeed, he thinks that they provide a picture of human beings and of human life which actively prevents us from developing the kind of psychological science that will allow us to control human behavior for the purpose, he says, of eliminating human suffering.

And it’s our clinging to these outmoded notions of personhood and to these outmoded axiological and moral notions that he thinks is the biggest obstacle. In other words, Skinner thinks that our science and technology of behavior could be as advanced as our sciences and technologies are in physics, in biology and chemistry. He thinks that it is literally our self-image that is holding us back. It is the self-image that we have that is holding us back. And he says this — and Skinner is really an excellent writer. I’m sure I’m not hiding very well my distaste for these views. I don’t like Skinner’s position. But one can only admire a) the forcefulness with which he argues for his position and the beautiful clarity of his thought. There’s no obscuritism here. He’s not trying to hide anything. He’s not deceptive. He’s not hiding behind niceties. He’s just coming out and saying it and that is 80 percent of intellectual virtue, it seems to me.

Listen to this quote from Beyond Freedom and Dignity. This is on page 19. Quote — he’s talking here about why we don’t yet have as advanced the science and technology of behavior as we do advanced science of physics or biology. He’s talking to the way in which he thinks this is because of our clinging to a certain self-image. Quote, “We have moved forward by dispossessing autonomous man.” He means by “we” the scientists, psychologists. “But he [the autonomous man] has not departed
gracefully. He is conducting a sort of rear-guard action in which, unfortunately, he can marshal formidable support. He is still an important figure [the autonomous man is] in political science, law, religion, economics, philosophy, ethics, history and family life. The result is a tremendous weight of traditional knowledge” — put in scare quotes because he doesn’t think it’s knowledge at all; he thinks it’s mythology — “which must be corrected or displaced by a scientific analysis,” unquote. That’s just a little taste of what’s to come.

We are going to explore two aspects of Skinner’s thought. We’re going to, first of all, examine his reasons for rejecting the idea of personhood and of the interior self, and the more general picture provided by the mentalist. And notice something. This critique, the critique of the idea of personhood, of the interior self, of the mentalist model of explanation — this critique is at least intellectually or logically separable from his social and political ambitions. In other words, his critique — he could be against mentalism and the traditional notice of self for exactly the reasons that he is and have none of the social and political ambitions that he articulates. Indeed, his critiques are not that different from Gilbert Ryle’s and I don’t have any reason to think that Gilbert Ryle had anything like the social and political ideas or ambitions that Skinner does.

So the first thing that we’re gonna discuss is really — are his scientific objections to the idea of personhood and to the mentalistic model of explanation, and they are — they stand on their own. They are, however, crucial to the second thing we’re gonna talk about which is his desire for technology of behavior in a scientifically planned society. That is, the traditional notions of self and the traditional mentalistic model of explanation is simply not going to be useful if what we’re after is a way to control and manipulate social behavior.

Our discussion of his views will be based on a portion of two works. One is a scientific work — the book is called Science and Human Behavior — and the second is
a polemical social/political work which is, of course, Beyond Freedom and Dignity. Just in close, let me just give you a little bit of data on B. F. Skinner. He was born in 1904, died not long ago, 1990. He spent a half century as professor of psychology at Harvard University. He was one of the founders and chief advocates of psychological behaviorism. He was the recipient of the first citation for outstanding lifetime contributions to psychology by the American Psychological Association, which is the lead organization of professional psychologists, and he was an outspoken advocate of social engineering and a scientifically planned society. But we must always keep in mind so that we don’t kill the messenger, even if we reject the message, that Skinner was motivated by humanitarian and humane concerns. He was not an undercover tyrant. Skinner really believed that our natural and social ills are sufficiently acute and our current methods of dealing with them are sufficiently insufficient that we have to completely change our way of doing things.

So next time we’re simply gonna dive into the details, the details of Skinner’s reasons for rejecting the idea of personhood and the mentalistic model of explanation of human behavior, and the details of his desire for technology of behavior and the scientifically planned society. The things to think about are the same things to think about that I left you with last time.

Thank you very much and we will see you next lecture.