Welcome back. We’re entering upon our second lecture on B. F. Skinner and our final lecture on this topic of personhood and personal identity, after which we will have our first exam — which I’m sure you’re looking forward to — and we’ll start a new topic. What we want to do today is go into the details not only of Skinner’s reasons for rejecting the traditional notion of persons and personal identity and the traditional mentalistic model of explaining human behavior, but we are also gonna go into the details of some of Skinner’s social and political motivations, what Skinner wants this science and technology of behavior for.

If you recall from last time, I said that his reasons for rejecting personhood, personal identity and mentalistic explanations come from his ways of thinking about science and stand on their own. That is, you could separate them from the rest of his project and you would still have a critique that needed to be contended with. But for Skinner, that critique is part and parcel of a larger social and political program. It’s because Skinner thinks that our traditional notions of personhood and personal identity and the mentalistic model of explanation are a hindrance to the development of the science and technology of behavior that he wants to oppose them. That being said, however, even were you to remove the social and political ambitions, the critique would still stand and would need to be responded to if we were so inclined.

It’s important to Skinner that we have a science and technology from behavior because he thinks that it’s only then that we’ll properly be able to manage human life and alleviate human suffering that is the result both of our social forms of life and the result of the impact on our lives from nature. So Skinner is in his own mind a humanitarian. He is profoundly moved by the social and natural ills that face the human race and he is not satisfied with the progress that has already been made.

I mean, I talked a little bit last time about the amazing human potential that’s been unleashed by modernity and by the scientific revolutions — there were, of course,
many scientific revolutions — and the intellectual revolutions over the last 500 years. That is, more human beings are living in free democratic societies and are living longer and better lives as a result of the scientific and intellectual revolutions of the last 500 years. But Skinner is simply — like many of his technocratic compatriots is simply not satisfied. Whether this is because he has an excessive sense of sympathy or whether perhaps he’s correct to be unsatisfied. The result is that he wants even more control over human life and over nature, and the only way to attain that sort of control is by way of the science and technology of behavior.

If we step back and think about this, Skinner, like many technocrats, has what I would argue is a reductive and simplistic conception of the human good. Like Wells before him — because H. G. Wells talks a lot like this also. I recommend to you a little book that H. G. Wells wrote called *The Conquest of Time*. You know, talk about conquests. Where Skinner wants to conquer nature and society, and Wells is talking about conquering time. But Wells speaks this way, too, and Skinner talks like this all the time. It’s very clear that both of these thinkers, as well as the rest of the technocratic crowd, really thinks of human needs entirely in material terms. That is, the sum total of human needs have to do with food, shelter, longevity, physical health, and so on and so forth. And so the imperatives — the aims are always to conquer the sources of human pain and suffering. That is, to conquer those things that make us sick, that make us oppressed, that make us die young, that make us unhappy, and so on and so forth.

I call this a reductive and simplistic notion of human ends because I think that most of us don’t believe that material concerns exhaust the concerns that we have. This is not to trivialize material concerns or even to suggest that material concerns are perhaps not first and foremost in that it’s only once your belly is filled that you can then be worried about other sorts of things, perhaps less material and more active level of
consciousness type of concerns. But I think most people in most human civilizations from most of human history have thought that there is more to human life than the mere satisfaction of material needs.

It simply never occurs to Skinner that we might have ends beyond material ones and it never occurs to him that we might actually chafe under the kind of social engineering and management that he’s imagining. It never occurs to him the very fact of being socially managed might make us unhappy in ways that defeat the whole purpose of taking control over life and nature to the extent that he wants to take it. And so these are all sorts of things to think about as we talk about him and read him and think about him. Because even if we accept the basic critique that he offers of mentalism and of the traditional notions of the self, we might still want to reject the social/political program to which he is deploying — for the sake of which he’s deploying these critiques.

So let’s talk first about the critique itself and then we’ll talk a little bit more about the social and political program. That’s the way I’m gonna divide this up. I’m first gonna go straight to what is his actual critique, his scientific critique of the traditional notion of a person and the mentalistic model of explaining human behavior, and then we will talk about, in a little bit more detail, the relationship of that critique to his social and political program.

When we talk about the mentalistic model of explanation, we’re talking about explaining human behavior in terms of mental causes. Mental causes, of course, are internal causes. That is, from the outside — so I’m here and I’m observing your behavior. The behavior that you exhibit is something external, something I can observe. I can see you doing it. I can see you doing whatever you’re doing and hear you doing whatever you’re doing. To cite a mental cause as the explanation of that behavior is to refer to a cause that, unlike the effect, unlike the behavior, is not external
but is rather internal. The mental cause is inside you. It’s specifically inside your head.

And Skinner has the following worry. He says excessive focus on these kinds of internal causes, on mental causes, discourages investigation into external causes — by which he means environmental causes. And so let’s take a very simple behavior. Suppose you drink a glass of water and I want to explain why. I say, “Well, the reason that so-and-so drank the glass of water is because he’s thirsty — because he was thirsty.” In other words, I refer to a mental state, the mental state of being thirsty, as the cause of your water-drinking behavior.

With Skinner — what Skinner worries about is he says, “Look. To focus on this sort of cause, to focus on the mental — on the internal cause, is to give the illusion that one has explained the behavior, and thus discourages looking further for further causes of the behavior.” For example, perhaps prior to drinking you were out playing sports in the hot sun. So for three hours you’ve been out playing tennis in 90 degree weather on a cement court with the heat reflecting up into your face and onto your body, and then you came in and you had a glass of water. What Skinner says is if we focus on the mental cause, the being thirsty cause of your behavior, we might never investigate the environmental cause, namely the three hours of hot conditions that you just endured.

And Skinner wants to say, “Look. It’s not clear to me that with the internal cause, with the mental cause, you’ve really explained anything at all. If you’ve left out the environmental cause. Because the environmental cause is necessary to understand the mental cause.”

All right. So let’s imagine a chain of causes. So let E refer to the environmental cause. Let MS refer to the mental cause, the mental state, and let B refer to the behavior. If we think about the actual causal ideology, the causal history of the behavior, we would say E caused MS and MS caused B. The environmental situation
caused this person to have certain mental states which then caused them to engage in certain behaviors.

And what Skinner wants to say is if we ignore the E because we’re focused on the MS, if we ignore the environmental conditions and simply focus on the mental state as we tend to do, we really haven’t explained the behavior at all. He says on page 40 — and most of these quotations are gonna be from *Science and Human Behavior*. When we get to the second part of this lecture, when we start talking about the social and political program, there’ll be more from *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. On page 40 Skinner says, quote: “The practice of looking inside the organism for an explanation of behavior has tended to obscure the valuables which are immediately available for a scientific analysis. These variables lie outside the organism, in its immediate environment and in its environmental history.”

So he’s concerned that our focus on mental causes may, in fact, obscure the environmental causes which are necessary to understand the mental causes and thus to understand the behavior. So for one thing, if we simply refer to mental causes of behavior, we are still missing an explanation — namely, we are missing the explanation of the mental state itself. We don’t know what caused the mental state if we don’t look to the environment.

But he also has a second objection to mentalistic explanations that still fall within this general line of critique and that is he thinks that there’s something somewhat empty or vacuous in the mentalistic explanation. There’s really sort of two things that make mentalistic explanations empty or vacuous for Skinner. The first is, Skinner is not at all sure what it is we mean when we refer to a mental cause. So, for example, when I say that John drank because he was thirsty — or, to put it in stilted language but in the language of mental states, John drank he had the mental state of thirst.

Skinner is not sure what it is exactly that that is telling us. What does it mean to
say Skinner wonders that someone is thirsty?  Skinner says obviously what most people mean when they say X is thirsty is they mean X is likely to drink.  Or X will drink if you give him a drink.  If you offer him something.  And I’m sure this line of thinking must remind us of Ryle’s critique.  Ryle, of course, argued that mentalistic terms simply refer to behavioral dispositions.  They are a dispositional way of talking about behavior.  And what Skinner wants to say is what else does the word thirsty mean other than likely to drink?  And if that’s all it means, then what you’ve basically said is that he drank because he was likely to drink and Skinner says this is an empty explanation.

Secondly, there’s a more general sense in which mental explanations are vacuous or empty, according to Skinner.  These mental states, these thoughts and tensions, beliefs, desires belong to what we call the person, what we call the self.  This is the basic Cartesian Lockean idea.  Once you sort of take away the disputes over dualism and whether this is to be interpreted dualistically or not, the general idea is that we have a whole bunch of internal mental states — the thoughts, beliefs, desires, etc. — and that these comprise our inner self, that these are what make us do the voluntary behaviors that we engage in.

And so what Skinner does is he refers to mentalistic explanations as explanations of behavior in terms of an inner man — or, as he sometimes calls it, a homunkulus.  A homunkulus is a little creature — in folklore and mythology, a homunkulus is often a little creature that serves a wizard or a sorcerer.  It’s kind of a — either a summoned or a created little imp-like thing.  And he uses the word homunkulus to convey the sense in which he thinks that such an inner man is fictional.  It doesn’t exist.

Think about this.  The drinking is the behavior performed by the outer man, by the physical organism, by the human being, and we’re explaining that behavior in terms of the thoughts of an inner man.  Ryle referred to this inner man as the ghost in the
machine. Less pejoratively, obviously, Locke refers to this inner man as the person. But, in any event, Skinner says we explain the behavior of the outer man in terms of — the mentalist explains the behavior of the outer man in terms of the behavior of the inner man, but, of course, the behavior of the inner man is never explained. And so at the end we’ve explained nothing.

If you look again at page — in *The Science of Human Behavior*, page 41, with respect to the first point about the emptiness of saying that someone drinks because he’s thirsty, Skinner says, quote: “To what extent is it helpful to be told he drinks because he is thirsty if to be thirsty means nothing more than to have a tendency to drink? Then this is mere redundancy.” And so this is the first point that, look, what does it mean to say someone is thirsty? Well, all it means is that he’s likely to drink. So to say that he drinks because he’s thirsty is not the same at all. It’s certainly not to explain anything that’s of any use to the person who wants to develop a technology of behavior.

The second point, this point about the inner man. If you look at page 14 of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Skinner says, quote: “Unable to understand how or why a person we see behaves as he does, we attribute his behavior to a person we cannot see whose behavior we cannot explain either and about whom we are not inclined to ask questions. The function of the inner man is to provide an explanation which will not be explained in term. Explanation stops with him. We say that he is autonomous. And so far as the signs of behavior are concerned, that means miraculous.”

So there’s two senses in which mentalistic explanations Skinner says are empty. One sense is the smaller sense in which they employ a kind of redundancy. They employ a mentalistic vocabulary that is little more than a dispositional way of referring to behavior. And in a more general, broader sense, mentalistic explanations are ones in which we explain the behavior of the outer man in terms of the states of an inner man,
but the states of the inner man are never themselves explained. So this is one line of
criticism that Skinner levies against the traditional notion of persons and against
mentalistic explanations.

A second line of criticism that Skinner runs is — tracks the fact that mental
causes are internal. I mean, and if you think about this, this makes the explanation of
human behavior very different from and more difficult than the explanation of the
behavior of inanimate objects. So if I want to explain why the 8-ball rolled into the
corner pocket, I explain it in terms of it rolled into the corner pocket because it was hit
by the cue ball. In that case — and that’s sort of a mechanical explanation. In that
case, not only is the effect the thing to be explained publicly observable but the cause is
publicly observable. They are both, in a sense, out there for everyone to see.

But on the mentalistic model of explanation, while the thing to be explained, the
behavior, is external and therefore observable, the cause, the mental state, is internal
and thus not directly observable. And here it depends upon whether the — the critique
depends upon whether one is attacking a mentalist who is a materialist than as a
mentalist who thinks that mental states are internal states but they’re just neurological
states of the brain and a mentalist who’s a dualist like Descartes. If one if a
materialistic mentalist — that is, a non-dualist mentalist — then the problem of
observing mental states is purely a difficulty. It’s not impossible. I mean, you can cut
up someone’s brain or scan their brain and look at the neurological events going on
inside. If one is a dualist, of course, then mental states are unobservable in principle
because they are not physical events. They are spiritual events and thus have no
physical realization. So inner states are at least difficult if not impossible to observe
and Skinner thinks that this is a real problem if what we’re trying to do is establish a
science of human behavior. Because in a science, one needs to be able to observe
not only the effects but the causes.
A second and related criticism is that — again, depending upon whether the mentalism we're talking about is a dualistic or non-dualistic variety — mental states are going to be difficult if not impossible to control and manipulate. Remember, the reason we want the science of behavior for Skinner is because we want the technology of behavior. The reason we want the technology of behavior is because we want to be able to manage human life. The reason we want to manage human life, of course, is for all the noble, humanitarian reasons that Skinner has in mind: cure disease, get rid of over-population, stop tyranny, and so on and so forth.

The problem is, if you remain — if the primary cause of human behavior is something inside the mind, either neurological neurochemical events or Cartesian states, then they are either difficult or impossible to observe, difficult or impossible to control, and this goes directly against the very aims of the science of behavior that Skinner is after.

Let's look at pages 41 and 42 of Science and Human Behavior, starting at the bottom of the first column on 41. He says, "We have a causal chain consisting of three links: an operation performed upon the organism from without" — that's the environment; for example, water deprivation — "2. An inner condition" — the mental state; for example, physiological or psychic thirst — and "3. A kind of behavior" — for example, drinking.

Direct information about the second link, the mental state, however, is seldom if ever available. Secondly, he says, "The second link also is useless in the control of behavior unless we can manipulate it. At the moment, we have no way of directly altering neuroprocesses at appropriate moments in the life of a behaving organism." Now, of course, that is a bit dated. We do have ways of manipulating neurochemistry now with psycho pharmaceuticals, with psychotropic drugs. But then he goes on to say — he anticipates this. He says, quote, "Even if some new technical discovery were to
enable us to set up or change the second link directly, we should still have to deal with those enormous areas in which human behavior is controlled through manipulation of the first link.”

In other words — and I think that this is clearly true. If your aim is control, if your aim is to be able to manipulate human behavior, it is far easier and more precise to manipulate environment than to try to manipulate brain chemistry. Even with the huge explosion of psychotropic drugs and the use of psychotropic drugs in mental health care. The techniques of psychotherapy are overwhelmingly behaviorists. That is, in clinical practice. Yes, we’re drugging up an awful lot of people and we’re giving an awful lot of people antidepressants and anti-anxiety and all these other sorts of drugs. But other than in the case of hard core psychoses, like schizophrenia or manic depression, we’re talking about your garden variety of mental sort of problems and even worse, sort of obstinacy, let’s say, in beliefs or ways. It’s far more effective to control a person’s environment and to modify their behavior than it is to try to control their brains directly, and that probably will always be true or at least in the foreseeable future.

So what Skinner wants to say is, “Look” — and think about it this way. Causality is a transitive relation. What do I mean by that? Well, going to our E, MS and B. To say that causality is a transitive relation is to say the following. It’s to say that if E causes MS and if MS causes B, then E causes B. If environment is the cause of the mental state and the mental state is the cause of the behavior, the environment is the cause of the behavior. Thus we can alter the behavior by manipulating the environment. Skinner’s point is it’s much easier and more precise to manipulate the environment than to try to manipulate the mental state. For example, you can observe it directly without difficulty, without equipment, without cutting people’s heads open, without brain scans and so on and so forth. Secondly, you can manipulate it much more easily, You don’t need to use drugs. You don’t need to use electro stimulation.
You just adjust the environment that the person is in.

So these are Skinner’s chief criticisms of the traditional notion of persons and of mentalistic explanations. First, that with mental explanations we still leave the ultimate cause of behavior unexplained because we don’t — we haven’t yet explained where the mental states come from. That mentalistic explanations are, in any event, in themselves somewhat vacuous or uninformative. They don’t tell us much more than that a person is likely to do something. They purport to explain the behavior of an external man in terms of an internal man. Furthermore, mental causes — the causes that mentalists want to appeal to are difficult or impossible to observe. They’re difficult or impossible to control. In any event, since causality is a transitive relation, if mental states cause behavior and if environment causes mental states, then environment causes behavior and we may as well then turn our attention to the environment rather than to the mind and to mental states.

This is the essential critique that Skinner offers. As we’ve said and not repeated several times, and as I’m sure we’re understanding, for Skinner this critique informs a larger social and political program that he wants to put forward — that is, the development of the science and technology of behavior that will allow us to scientifically plan and manage human life, all for the sake of eliminating natural and social ills.

Now, obviously Skinner believes — and this is not only Skinner’s belief; this is obviously true — that the state of psychological science is nowhere as advanced as the state of physical science. Physics, chemistry, biology are in far greater stages of advancement than psychology. In part, this is simply because psychology is newer. It’s been around less long. But Skinner also thinks that our — certain attitudes that we have are holding us back. Specifically, that we have a certain self-image, this image of the autonomous person, the moral agent. Because personhood, freedom or autonomy and axiological and moral qualities go together. They form a family of concepts, as we
remember and know from John Locke’s work. Skinner thinks that we are actively hindering our capacity to develop a modern psychological science and thus a technology of behavior.

I want to talk for the remaining time here about why he thinks we are hindering ourselves, how we are hindering ourselves, and what we need to do in order to stop hindering ourselves. Skinner makes a very interesting observation and it’s a true one, and that is that once upon a time we used to explain all natural phenomena in mentalistic terms. I mean even the behavior of inanimate matter. The behavior of all natural processes used to be in mentalistic terms. Both prehistoric men and ancient civilizations explained physical events in terms of external and internal intentions and motivations. You know, why did it rain? It rained because God or the gods were angry. Or it rained because the gods were beneficent. Depending on whether you needed the rain or not, it was due either to their anger or their beneficence.

Skinner says — if you look at pages 7 to 8, Skinner gives a nice little history here. Quote, “Man’s first experience with causes” — and, of course, causes are the means by which we explain effects, phenomena. “Man’s first experience with causes probably came from his own behavior. Things moved because he moved them. If other things moved, it was because someone else was moving them. If the mover could not be seen, it was because he was invisible. The Greek gods served in this way as the causes of physical phenomena. They were usually outside the things they moved but they might enter into and possess them.”

So you can imagine — if you want to know why is this rock falling, well, the rock is felling because a little creature got inside and is pushing it down. And Skinner’s point here, I think, is a very interesting one. It says look. We know from our own movement that we cause ourselves to move, and so if anything else is moving it means somebody else is causing them to move. If we can’t the somebody else, then
somebody else must be invisible.

He then goes on to say — this is on page 8 — “Although physics soon stopped personifying things in this way, it continued for a long time to speak as if they had wills, impulses, feelings, purposes, and other fragmentary attributes of an in-dwelling agent. Aristotle argued that a falling body accelerated because it grew more jubilant as it found itself nearer home. Later authorities suppose that a projectile was carried forward by an impetus sometimes called an impetuosity.”

So what Skinner is pointing out is the sense in which — excuse me — the sense in which prehistoric and ancient man used to explain everything in mentalistic terms. And here’s an equally important point that follows from this. He says what marked progress in the physical sciences was precisely that they abandoned the mentalistic model of explanation in favor of a purely mechanical mode of explanation. That is, scientists abandoned the personified image — and this is important the way I’m referring to this because I’m going to say exactly the same thing — Skinner is going to say exactly the same thing about human behavior. Scientists replaced the personified image of matter for a purely neutral quantitative notion of matter, and replaced the mentalistic model of explanation with a purely mechanical quantitative mode of explanation.

That is what marked progress in the sciences. Indeed, that was precisely the shift that marked the mechanical revolution in physics. We talked about this in an earlier lecture. What the mechanical revolution in physics consisted of at its most deepest conceptual level was the abandonment of the premodern personified conception of matter in favor of a purely quantitative neutral conception of matter and it was marked by an abandonment of the mentalistic model of explanation that went along with the personified notion of matter in favor of a purely quantitative mechanical notion of explanation, which went along with the new conception of matter.
However, such progress has not been made in the scientific study of human nature. In psychology we cling to the personified view. Skinner says — on pages 9 to 10 Skinner says, quote: “Almost everyone who is concerned with human affairs — as political scientist, philosopher, man of letters, economist, psychologist, linguist, sociologist, theologian and apologist, educator or psychotherapist — continues to talk about human behavior in this pre-scientific way.” Next page 10: “This is staple fare. Almost no one questions it and yet there is nothing like it in modern physics or most of biology, and that fact may well explain why a science in the technology of behavior has been so long delayed.”

So it’s precisely the fact that we cling to a personified self image, that we think of ourselves as persons, that we think of our behavior as caused by thoughts and other mental states that has hindered progress in psychological science, in the human sciences, has retarded the development of a technology of behavior, and Skinner thinks he knows this is true because we have the example of the other sciences to compare again. The other sciences advanced precisely when they abandoned personified notions of their subject and mentalistic models of explanation. So it must be the case, Skinner thinks, that our clinging to a personified self-image and mentalistic explanations with respect to human behavior — it’s precisely our clinging to that, Skinner says, which must be responsible for the retarded state of psychological science. It never occurs to Skinner, notice, that human nature may be a fundamentally different kind of subject than physical nature. That the human sciences may have a fundamentally different cast, a different look, a different method to the natural sciences. This never occurs to him. He simply assumes there’s one nature, there’s one set of things in nature, and they’re all going to have the same kinds of explanations.

This, by the way, is not simply Skinner's view. It is the view of the scientific revolution taken more generally. If you take all the scientific revolutions together, there
is a general assumption that one model of explanation, one type of image, is suitable to the explanation of all the things that exist as a part of nature, including us.

Skinner outlines several reasons why he thinks we are resistant. That is, he wants to explore why exactly do we cling to this personified self-image. Why exactly do we cling to mentalistic forms of explanation? Why do we resist the kind of scientific revolution in psychology that we had in physics and in the other hard sciences? He gives a number of reasons. First, he thinks we are vested in the idea of autonomy and of freedom. We have a vested interest in the idea that we are uncaused, that our behaviors ultimately are the result of our own control and not the control of external forces.

For one thing, this self-image satisfies our vanity. It’s a bit of a demotion to find out that one’s behavior is not actually under one’s own control but is actually the result of forces largely outside of one’s control. That is not something that is pleasing to our vanity. And so in part, clinging to the personified self-image and to mentalistic explanations is a way of clinging to this idea that we are autonomous and free, that our behaviors are uncaused and are solely under our own control. But also these ideas of autonomy and freedom, this idea that we’re not uncaused, is crucial to other aspects of our identity which are also important to us and that’s what’s coming next.

We apply, as I said, moral and axiological concepts to ourselves. When we talk about our behavior, we don’t describe it purely at a mechanical level, We describe it at an axiological level. The basic notion of responsibility and of desert of obligation and of prerogative don’t seem to apply if we are not in control of our own actions. In other words, autonomy would seem to be a prerequisite for the possibility of the moral assessment of behavior.

If we were to abandon the idea that we're free, if we were to agree with Skinner that, no, our behavior is entirely caused and determined by the environment, the
thought is that we would no longer be able to speak of ourselves in moral terms. That
these moral concepts would no longer apply.

Skinner articulates these first two worries that we have, these first two reasons
for resisting a scientific revolution in human nature along the lines of the scientific
revolution in physics in two separate places. One is on page 19. He says, quote —
it's toward the bottom — “In the traditional view a person is free. He is autonomous in
the sense that his behavior is uncaused. He can therefore be held responsible for what
he does and justly punished if he offends.” All right. So it’s because we cherish our
capacity to engage in moral and other valued forms of assessment that we cling to the
notion of freedom and thus to the notion of personhood. Without personhood there’s
no freedom. Without freedom there is no morality or other forms of value.

And Skinner acknowledges this concern. He says, quote, “That view, together
with its associated practice” — meaning the old view — “must be reexamined when a
scientific analysis reveals unsuspecting controlling relations between behavior and
environment.” In other words, Skinner is saying, yes, you’re right. If we ever finally
accept the true causes of our behavior, if we ever accept a true behavioral science,
we’re gonna have to revisit all those moral notions. Because indeed they do rest upon
the notion of autonomy and freedom that is only compatible with a prescientific notion of
personhood and is not compatible with a scientific view of human nature.

Page 21, near the bottom, quote: “By questioning the control exercised by
autonomous man and demonstrating the control exercised by the environment, a
science of behavior also seems to question dignity or worth. A person is responsible
for his behavior not only in the sense that he may be justly blamed or punished when he
behaves badly but also in the sense that he is to be given credit and admired for his
achievements. A scientific analysis shifts the credit as well as the blame to the
environment and traditional practices can no longer be justified.”
So think about all the practices of punishment and reward that we engaged in. Think about how invested we are in these practices surrounding punishment and reward. All of these will have to be jettisoned because none of these will make sense once we acknowledge the environmental causes of behavior. In other words, what’s the point of giving an award to someone if he couldn’t help but do the things he did if the things he did were not the result of his control but were determined by his environment? Similarly, how could we justify locking someone up, imprisoning someone, fining someone, punishing in any way a person for their behavior if their behavior did not stem from their own will but instead from their environment?

So Skinner acknowledges these worries. He says, yes, these are the things that we are worried about. These are the reasons why we are clinging to these old notions of personhood and mental causes of behavior. And, yes, we will have to completely radically preconceive our self-image as well as our practices, many of our social and political practices — social, legal, moral, political practices — but he thinks that we have to do this. That the goal, the cause of eliminating human suffering, both caused by nature and by society, is so overwhelming as to render all of these kinds of worries, he thinks, trivial, retrograde, and in many cases he thinks there’s nothing more than vanity.

Finally, Skinner says we’re worried about external control. We’re worried that external control, control by a sort of scientific plan, constitutes a form of tyranny. We’re concerned about who will control the environment and thus who will control us. What will be the values of those scientists who control the environment and therefore control us? Now, it’s interesting. Skinner is not worried about this at all. He’s not worried about technocracy. He’s not worried about rule by scientists, ruled by scientific planners. He can’t even think of the scenario in these terms. Because to refer to a scientific plan or as a tyrant is to imply that his control represents his inflicting his will upon ours. But remember, Skinner is going to apply the same behavioral science to
the controller as to the people being controlled. The controller is no more an autonomous person acting under his own will than the people who his technology are controlling. The controller is as much controlled by the environment as everyone else and thus, Skinner says, there's no reason to worry about tyranny. Indeed, the very worry itself involves exactly the old-fashioned, defunct, bankrupted way of thinking that he's suggesting that we get rid of.

Let me just say a couple of things about this in closing. This course is an introduction to philosophy. The idea is to just to introduce you, to give you an overview, of some of the more important perennial lines of thought that have arisen within the context of philosophical discourse. And so I don't — I'm not going to engage in too much criticism, certainly not the kind of political criticism. I think it's quite obvious that I'm not in love with this view, that I don't like this way of thinking of Skinner's. But let me just say a few things about it that I think are uncontroversial. Let me just sort of mention a couple of criticisms — or one criticism, really, that I think everybody can agree with. Whether it’s a deal breaker or not, obviously I'll leave to you to decide.

I think that Skinner is altogether too sanguine. I mean, he's just too easygoing about this stuff. First of all, he's too sanguine about external control. This sort of point about — that I just made about the controllers — oh, we don't need to worry about the controllers because they're as much controlled by the environment as us. It just strikes me as naive. We have too much experience with tyranny to not fear it. You know, who cares that Stalin was ultimately caused by his environment. Nonetheless, no one was happy living under him. And so I think that largely Skinner's point about the controllers being controlled by the environment is sort of beside the point. It’s not really responsive to the fears about technocratic rule, the fears about rule by the controllers.

I also think that Skinner radically underestimates the impact of the kind of conceptual revolution that he's talking about. Indeed, I don't know that we can imagine
what human life will be like after the complete elimination of all of our concepts, ideas, notions that attach to the traditional view of persons and to the mentalistic picture. I don’t know — Skinner is completely altogether too easygoing about the potential effects of jettisoning all of our moral concepts, for example, or all of our axiological ways of thinking and ways of describing ourselves. He just doesn’t really sort of — he says, “Oh, these are just myths we can get rid of.” I don’t think he really truly has thought through or imagined what such a society would be like, or even if it’s possible to imagine it. That’s sad.

I would like to recommend a few books which I think people have tried to imagine precisely a vision like Skinner’s and have presented an altogether more negative picture of it. The most famous book, of course, that most closely mirrored — that describes a world that most closely mirrors the kind that Skinner is after, of course, is the novel Brave New World by Aldous Huxley, written fascinatingly in the 1930s prior to the rise of Hitler, prior to the rise of Stalin, and prior to the rise of modern technological society as we know it today. It’s amazingly prophetic. In particular, it gives a very, in my view, realistic and alarming picture of the consequences — the social consequences of a project like Skinner’s. Obviously, for the pro side you should take a look at Skinner’s own book, his own novel Walden Two, which presents the Skinnerian utopia in a positive light.

Of course I mentioned C. S. Lewis’s The Abolition of Man, which is not a novel but an essay, in which he attacks precisely a view like Skinner’s and focuses particularly on the tyranny of the controllers. And finally, another book by Lewis, this one a novel of C. S. Lewis, the third volume of his space trilogy — the name of it is That Hideous Strength. And thereto he tries to imagine a future in which scientific planners and engineers attempt to sort of take over society and what such a takeover would look like.

There are also any number of questions about behaviorism itself. So forgetting
about the social and political program, there are any number of questions about whether environmental explanations really are sufficient to explain behavior that is without appeal to mental causes. This point has been especially pressed in linguistics, with respect to linguistic behavior. The predominant view today is that our capacity to learn languages, especially our native language, and our capacity to — the way in which we can speak, and particularly the productivity of natural language. The fact that from a finite amount of experience a speaker can produce infinitely — potentially infinitely many new sentences, that the evidence of natural language acquisition and use speaks against purely environmental causes of linguistic behavior.

So any number of questions have been raised about behaviorism in and of itself as a complete model or picture of human behavior. That’s all I’ll say by way of critique. The rest I’ll have to leave to your own investigations and to future study.

As I said at the beginning, we’re going to — we’ll have an exam on this part of the course, everything from Descartes through Skinner. The next lecture is going to begin a new — start off a new topic. The topic is Human Knowledge. What does human knowledge consist of, how is it acquired. There’s no reading for next time since I will simply introduce the topic, and we will only dive into specific authors and specific theories of knowledge in subsequent lectures.

So see you at your first exam and see you at our next lecture. Thank you very much.