

*Behavior Mod:*

# Is the Pigeon Always Right?

“Behavior mod evades as far as possible questions of guilt, sin, intent, or moral judgment. It makes no appeals to conscience and shows no punitive intent. . . . Thus a school in which children are strapped or drugged is about as far from behavior mod as it can get.”

**T**he use of psychotechnical procedures and devices to modify human behavior has become commonplace. Schools, prisons, mental hospitals, and increasingly—as the appalling disclosures of Amnesty International reveal—the national state itself, rely on such means to socialize and control those subject to them. Many of us feel both alarmed and confused by the extensive array of practices now used. The technical manipulation of human behavior and attitudes has become institutionalized in so many different ways that it is hard to be sure just what is taking place. And not all the objectionable practices are objectionable for the same reasons.

For example, people who object to the use of behavior modification programs in schools often go on to complain of the widespread use of mood-altering drugs like Ritalin to control the behavior of children teachers find disruptive, using the pretext that they are “hyperkinetic.” The two practices thus tend to become linked. But the use of drugs to control disruptive behavior is utterly inconsistent with the doctrines of behavior mod, which would regard this as a very gross and not really psychological way of controlling human behavior, having nothing in common with operant conditioning. This does not, of course, mean that school personnel who are pragmatic and insensitive may not use both, but their effect on the person subjected to them, and the reason for condemning their use, is quite different.

Drugs are used, sometimes with fiendish cruelty, in aver-

sive therapy, of which the most familiar example is the treatment portrayed in *A Clockwork Orange*. Aversive therapy is a form of behavior modification and an abhorrent one—and its use seems to be spreading. One proposed program which was to have been introduced into a prison in North Carolina last year was aborted by the courts on constitutional grounds; but others making use of forms of negative reinforcement that sound equally cruel are continually being developed.

Orthodox proponents of behavior mod, however, usually don't think too much of aversive therapy. The doctrine holds, on the basis of a great deal of evidence from animal experimentation, that positive reinforcement is a much more effective form of operant conditioning than negative reinforcement which if severe is likely to so disturb or antagonize the subject that he or she won't learn anything from it. Strict behaviorists prefer to “extinguish” behavior they regard as undesirable by ignoring it or isolating its practitioner, while rewarding each successive approximation of the behavior they are trying to foster.

This similarity to accepted social practice leads most behaviorists to insist that behavior modification is really nothing new; it's something all of us do every day in the course of ordinary social interaction. But this is false. Families, schools, prisons, and society itself do, of course, make use of rewards and punishments more or less systematically to train people to do what the authorities want; and they

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always have. But there are fundamental differences between the use of rewards and punishments in socialization and the use of positive and negative reinforcement in behavior modification.

[THE POWER TO WILL]

The most important difference has to do with the function of the will, which is basic to the western concept of morality. Our moral system holds that both good and evil must be willed; one cannot sin inadvertently, and there can be no crime without criminal intent. Traditional moralists therefore think of themselves not as encouraging desirable behavior and discouraging undesirable behavior, but as “teaching children the difference between right and wrong.” The most authoritarian moralists, steeped in the doctrine of original sin, often used to speak of the need to “break the will of the child,” forcing the child through guilt or fear to repress impulses they deemed evil, which included most spontaneous and natural behavior.

*Nobody does anything like this to a laboratory rat or a pigeon; and so far the behaviorists would seem to occupy the higher moral ground. And they certainly have the easier technical problems. The Victorians, if I may use that term loosely and none-too-accurately to identify older-fashioned moralists, could make very little use of positive reinforcement, since they were trying to establish norms at the same time that they were trying to influence behavior: that is, they were trying to teach people what they ought to enjoy at the same time they were trying to get them to do it. But to serve as positive reinforcement the reward offered, however trivial, must be genuinely prized already—the pigeon, as behaviorists sometimes say, is always right. Victorian moralism at its worst sought to use the same occasions both to offer rewards and to define those rewards as desirable—a technical error no Skinnerian would be likely to make. Good little boys won prizes that could hardly have given them much satisfaction: edifying books that no one could read with pleasure; minor posts in school or church that cost them more status among their peers than they gained among adults. The phrase “brownie points” for status so earned still conveys the position exactly.*

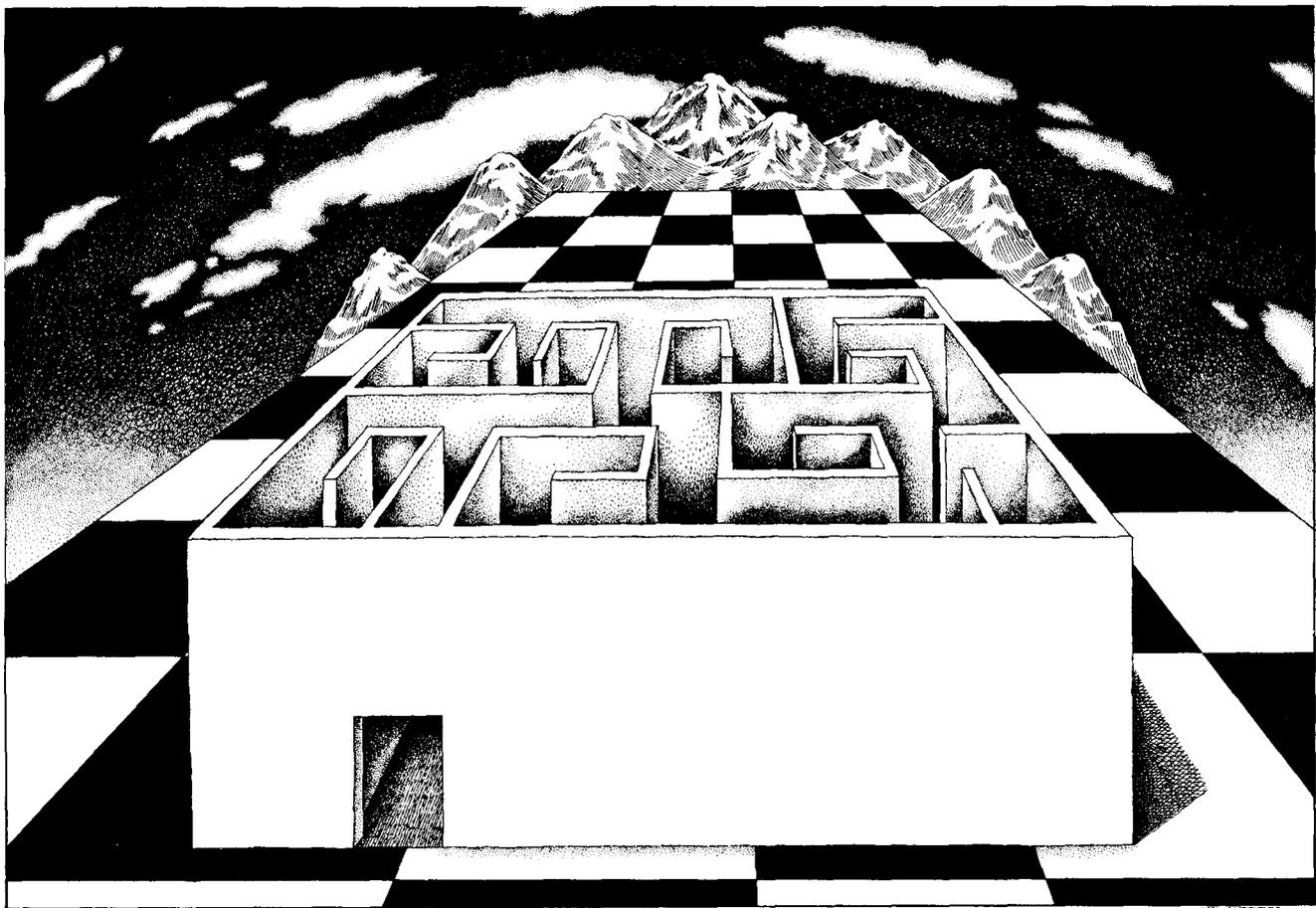
This is clearly one reason for the emphasis on competitive sports in British public-school life, both as a means of socialization and of selecting future leaders. For of course success on the playing fields did confer status in the peer group as well as among adults, and was ardently desired. It could be won, moreover, only by displaying a mixture of guile and brutality that established clearly that the sanctimonious lessons of official morality had not been so thoroughly internalized as to disqualify the student for future

public service. England’s battles were won on the playing fields of Eton in the sense that these provided a crucial testing ground for identifying those young members of the ruling class who could combine the most essential ingredients of a viceregal presence: sanctimonious adherence to an honorable creed; and the ability and disposition to kick the shit out of an adversary, especially one beyond the pale, literally or figuratively. By weighing points won on the playing field more heavily than brownie points, pre-World War I society insured itself against awarding actual positions of leadership to people who conformed too daintily to moral precepts.

Much of what we sense as freedom in western bourgeois life stems, however, from precisely this moralistic, inconsistent, and thoroughly Skinnerian use of reward and punishment—not to modify behavior, but to “build character.” For this traditional use carries within itself the seeds of rebellion that have permitted Western Civilization to redeem itself from time to time. The essence of the traditional approach is that socialization requires that morality be internalized; that the child or the prisoner or the revolutionary be ultimately led to accept and endorse the creed of his subjectors—to agree with them about the difference between right and wrong. Thereafter, his conscience or his superego, however one wished to view it, is at the disposal of society; he has become his own narc. Crime and sin, conversely, can thereafter be defined as, necessarily, willful acts and their perpetrators as guilty.

When this sort of socialization fails, it may fail absolutely, as with members of the counterculture who, having come to despise the promised rewards of affluence, can no longer be threatened by poverty; though as they grow older they may find their exclusion from a meaningful role in society less supportable than their austere standard of living. These are the children who were socialized primarily by offering them rewards they were expected to learn to enjoy, whether they wanted them or not, in order to make their place in the middle class. When they were punished, they were punished by withholding these same rewards whose denial was ambiguous in its effects. This applies even to withholding affection—the standard middle-class punishment—which can be devastating to an infant or even to an older child before adjusting to it. But our recollections of our mothers must remind us that there comes a time when almost any child of six or older may feel about her threat to take her leave of him much as Hamlet did about Polonius’s similar threat. Punishment affords many middle-class children about the only privacy they ever get.

Socialization that seeks to use conventional rewards as positive reinforcement before it has established that they are, in fact, rewards, is likely to come unstuck, strewing society with rebels, hippies, and other protagonists of free-



dom. Even when it does not come unstuck as completely as that, the fact that our normal socialization attempts to mold the will—rather than simply elicit desirable behavior—leaves the will dormant but intact and ready, if sufficiently provoked, to pit itself against society. As Lawrence Kohlberg has shown in his fundamental work on the development of moral awareness in human beings, those few who reach the highest levels of moral awareness become enemies of society through the very effectiveness of their socialization: they are people who have actually internalized the values of the society rather than its rules. These include of course, the nobler leaders of the peace and civil rights movements, who had been so well socialized into the western tradition that they accepted and acted upon the fact that sin must be willful and includes, especially, willful obedience to evil law. At this point, self-awareness and moral insight converge with a blinding flash and sometimes explosive violence, illuminating the institutions of a corrupt and unjust society and shaking them to—and sometimes from—their foundations.

[BEYOND FREEDOM]

All this could be avoided by the widespread use of behavior modification, which does not seek to mold or develop the will, but to avoid probate. Behavior mod evades as far as possible questions of guilt, sin, intent, or moral judgment. It makes no appeals to conscience and shows no punitive intent. This is why the

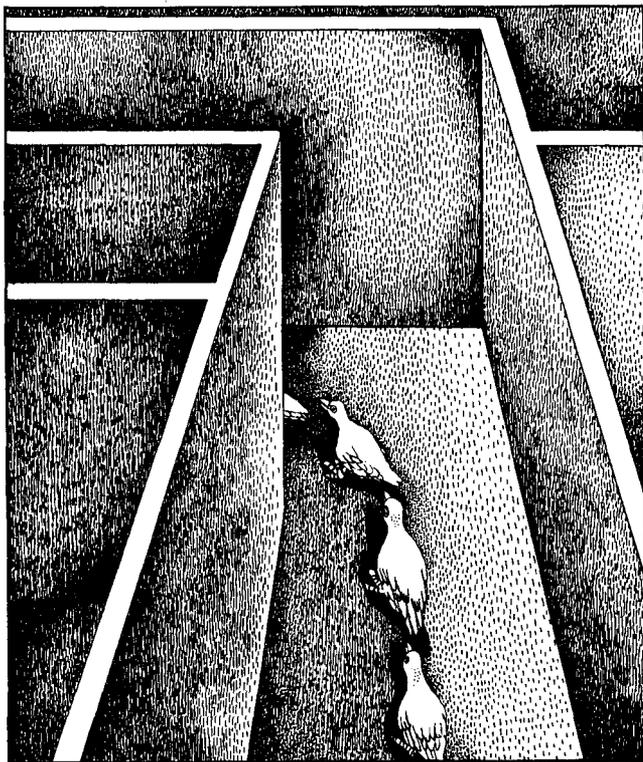
scientists to whom Alex is delivered in *A Clockwork Orange* seem so much nicer than the jailers do. But in fact they are much crueller, not because they wish to punish him more severely, but because they do not care about him at all except as the object of their psychotechnology. He can neither seduce them, nor arouse their pity or their rage. Where the prison officials represent as best they can a lower-middle-class vision of the wrath and occasionally the pity of God, exacting from Alex in return an unbearable semblance of piety, the scientists at the institute exemplify His absence, a severer form of Hell. They cannot be placated, obeyed, or disobeyed; and they are not trying to teach Alex anything about the difference between right and wrong. They are simply trying to condition him so that he can no longer respond violently in any situation, whatever its moral context.

But this is aversive therapy which, though a form of operant conditioning, is not representative of most programs of behavior modification. What distinguishes behavior mod is not the use of bizarre techniques to inflict pain. It is rather the attempt to evoke the behavior sought through “reinforcing” it and “extinguishing” undesired alternatives while deliberately avoiding the moral confrontation involved. The outcome sought is conformity without conflict and without the need or perhaps even the capacity for moral judgment. One could even, of course, develop an apparent “non-conformity” in this way by responding favorably to a child’s attempts to argue and “answer back” and to go off and “do his own thing” while ignoring his

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efforts to be cooperative and join the group. One could encourage a child’s—or an adult’s—propensities for artistic or musical expression while cooling out his or her interests in and abilities in sport; or, of course, vice-versa.

Isn’t this, then, precisely what goes on for better or for worse in the process of normal socialization? Isn’t this how little boys learn not to cook and sew and little girls learn not to play football? Isn’t this the way liberal Jewish parents raise radical Jewish children? I would say no, not by a damned sight. For in all these cases, the emotional and moral influences that mold the child are authentically and spontaneously present, for better or for worse, in the family and the culture as it is encountered; and the spontaneity and authenticity contribute to growth and mediate constraint; they are lively irritants. Every culture establishes certain roles and encourages those aspects of development that suit individuals to fill them, while discouraging others. But a culture is not a conspiracy; and the boy whose parents are trying to reinforce his limited interests in football may well have a brother who is a disappointment to his family—but not to himself—because he is a poet; a sister who is a policewoman, and an uncle who, as *chef de cuisine* at *Le Parvenu*, has the highest status in the family.



Even today, the world is a lot less ordered than a psychological laboratory, or a school in which children are given candy tokens for promptness or achievement and ignored if they are late or dilatory. Furthermore, there are errant and rebellious teachers just as there are students. Jim Herndon still teaches in Daly City, and manages to survive in his native land even though things ain’t the way they’re supposed to be. When Tierra Firma Junior High converts to behavior mod, they won’t be able to keep him any more; and students who don’t want their behavior modified will have no more place to hide.

Since the world is rife with oppression, conflict, and injustice, neither the school nor the family is likely to be free of them; and a child who had been so singularly fortunate as never to have encountered them there would probably find adult life astonishingly uncomfortable. Nevertheless, even at their worst, the school and the family, like the Austrian bureaucracy under the later Hapsburgs, are usually redeemed by their inefficiency and inconsistency, which make it possible to learn to be a human being there as elsewhere in the world. In a school that deals with pupils according to principles of behavior modification this would be far less likely; since how the teachers, and so far as possible, schoolmates, respond to a child is programed in advance with the intent of encouraging behavior defined by the school as socially desirable and starving out that which is less desirable. His experience of how other people respond to him becomes very limited: he may never learn, for example, how angry he makes them if his teachers have decided that displays of anger reinforce offensive behavior by providing recognition, and prescribe a good, hard ignoring instead.

Behavior modification is planned to mold desirable behavior directly, without rooting it in character or ethical purpose. It seeks to operate at Kohlberg’s lowest level of moral judgment: behavior is good because it is rewarded. This is a serious denial of the humanity of the person subjected to it. But I think, to be fair, one must also state that this is the worst that can be said of it. As I have indicated, orthodox practitioners of behavior modification are less likely to be punitive than ordinary teachers or parents, because they have found negative reinforcement is an inefficient and unreliable way of extinguishing undesired behavior. This is not as satisfactory a reason for avoiding it as respect for the dignity of the victim; but it does mean that a school in which children are strapped or drugged in order to control their behavior is about as far from behavior mod as it can get.

There are other objections, however. Behavior modification programs by their very nature rely heavily on ex-

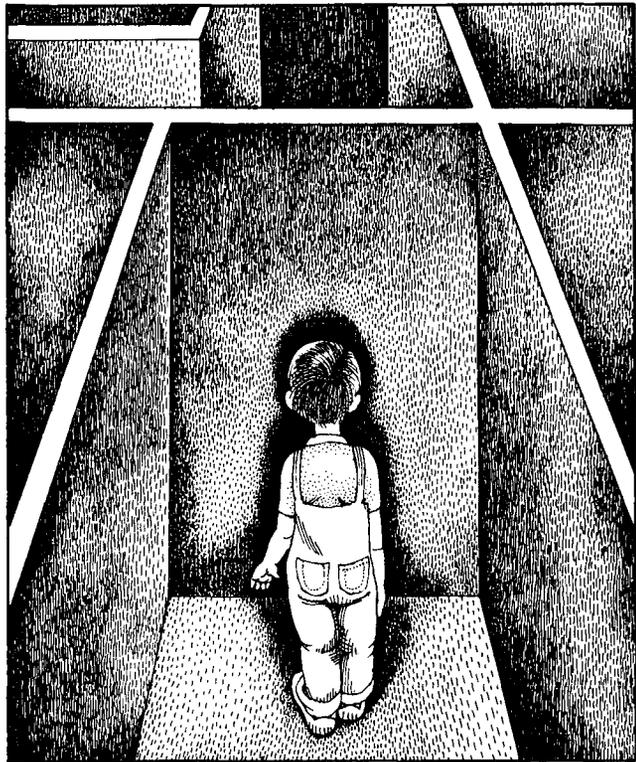
trinsic rewards; and these rewards, unlike school grades, are not even supposed to be granted in recognition of excellent performance but simply as pleasurable reinforcement for behavior desired by someone else. You can, indeed, train a pigeon to execute a complicated dance perfectly by the pure application of behavior modification techniques; indeed, there is probably no other way to do it. But such a pigeon cannot be said to have developed an interest in ballet. Everybody knows the old statistical saw about how 20 chimpanzees locked up in a room with 20 typewriters and an inexhaustible supply of paper would eventually write, among other things, *War and Peace*. If the primate lab were run according to the principles of behavior mod, and each primate reinforced for every phrase that resembled one of Tolstoi's, the task might be accomplished in 50 years. It would not leave the monkeys in a frame of mind, however, to go ahead and tackle *Anna Karenina* on their own.

Children educated by the techniques of behavior modification may not even know what ordinary people mean by being interested in something they do well. It must be conceded, however, that school grades which, in any case, are as extrinsic as the tokens or bits of candy that successful participants in behavior mod programs usually get, have also come to have almost as little to do with achievement and interests, as academic standards are adapted to meet the strains imposed by demographic and cultural change. An 'A' in a New York City high school today has about as much meaning as the free rum drink most Caribbean hotels give arriving guests to make them feel at home and avert culture shock.

[PUSHBUTTON MORALITY]

**M**uch more serious ethical questions arise, however, with reference to aversive therapy. Although aversive therapy always involves negative reinforcement by doing something disagreeable and often agonizing or terrifying to the client on whom it is being practiced, it is totally different in its intent and psychological function from torture, and should be clearly distinguished from it. I think it is worse, though the choice of the lesser of two such evils is hardly worth making.

The painful stimuli used in aversive therapy are usually much less severe than those used in torture—though not always; both have made use of certain drugs that arrest respiration and arouse the feeling of impending death by suffocation, which is probably the ultimate in terror. But the torturer at least respects his victim to the extent of attributing to him a will to be broken; though with modern techniques which disorient the victim as they torment him, he hasn't much chance to resist in the long run. Torturers, moreover, do not usually want to alter their victim's mode of behavior in general, but have very specific ends. They want to extract a confession or information, and the less the victim is altered in the process the more plausible the confession will be. Torture is nearly always clandestine; and its revelation is an embarrassment to its practitioners. Its prevalence in the present era is, I should judge, essentially evidence of the dignity constitutional democracy once pos-



sessed, as well as of its decline. It flourishes in situations in which people still suppose themselves to possess certain rights that have in fact vanished, but have never been taken off the books. To achieve a final and conclusive victory, the torturer finds it most helpful if he can bring his victim into open court to deny that he has been tortured.

Aversive therapy differs from torture in almost all these respects. It is not clandestine, though the actual details may be played down for PR purposes. The existence of the program, however, is not denied; in fact it is usually reported as a sign of technical progress in therapy or criminology. Those who accept aversive therapy usually are called volunteers, though in fact they offer themselves under extreme social coercion—usually under the threat of becoming a social outcast. And it is used only under one set of circumstances.

Aversive therapy can be applied only to mess up and spoil something that gives the client or patient great pleasure, but that gets him into enough trouble that he is willing to allow that pleasure to be spoiled by being mixed with other sensations sufficiently disagreeable to overwhelm it, and possibly him as well. It differs from the use of ordinary criminal sanctions in that, like other forms of behavior modification, aversive therapy seeks to evade rather than to develop the will. The person whose behavior has been successfully modified by aversive therapy does not restrain himself from committing punishable actions that still entice him through rational or irrational fear of punishment; but because the pleasure they give him has been spoiled by being repeatedly and consistently mixed with nausea, anxiety, humiliation, pain, or any combination of these, and by his own at least tacit consent. The alcoholic accepts an injection of apomorphine in a gruesome mock-

up of a bar, drinks, and throws up; or allows his body to be injected with chemicals which insure that drink will make him deathly ill. Men who have raped children or fear that they might, and even homosexuals, permit psychologists to wire them up and give them electric shocks as they are shown pictures that arouse them sexually. The effect of such programs with adults is likely to be transitory; since they are taking part in them precisely because they are already well-aware that alcohol or heroin, whatever damage they may ultimately cause, do not make them feel acutely ill; nor do they experience pain when they touch a child or a person of the same sex, as the case may be. What is likely to endure is a sense of permanent humiliation at having allowed one's body, and its precious capacity for diverse satisfaction, to be violated in the interests of confirming a social norm; instead of having used one's essential strength both to assert and to contain one's actual proclivities. Nothing saps the will, including the will to socially-defined misconduct, like self-betrayal.

There is one experience that is familiar enough to many adults—especially males, since girls are less frequently subjected to it in most families—to give them some idea of the psychological processes involved in aversive therapy, if childhood amnesia has not screened away the memory of the feelings involved. Spanking is a true, though pre-scientific, means of aversive therapy. This seems obvious where the victim's offense was masturbation or some other form of sex-play, since the effect is to abruptly replace pleasurable erotic sensations with others even more intense that are accompanied by enough humiliation and loss of autonomy to ruin the culprit's satisfaction. Whatever he gets spanked for, the child has to deal with the humiliation of being "turned on" by his assailant in a degradation ceremony in which pain, though nearly lost in the welter of sensations being aroused in him, is the only one that is socially validated; the others are extinguished. To show any awareness of lustful pleasure would be to compound his offense with impertinence and risk being really hurt; as well as exquisitely inappropriate to an occasion formally defined as dolorous. Spanking works by invoking sexuality only to invalidate and mock it; the message is that the victim has gotten too big for his britches, which are removed to facilitate the operation. It also hurts, but not much; only enough to underline insult with token injury. But the wellsprings of his pleasure are defiled, and with his consent. Children must submit to spanking, if only under threat of more severe and protracted punishment; and are expected to feel that it has done them good.

Aversive therapy can only be used in conjunction with pleasure to be spoiled. The merely coercive use of pain or the threat of pain may or may not alter behavior, but it isn't aversive therapy. In this respect spanking is closely analogous to the use of nausea to spoil the pleasure of problem drinkers and hence eliminate their misbehavior; because paddling—indeed, like drinking—is also an old-fashioned *rite de passage* in our culture, and one which the victim is expected to recognize and accept as sportive, if not entirely playful, and certainly as more friendly than punitive, even though it is much more severe than spanking. It has been the commonest means of initiation into groups of young males and even of marking the passage of birth-

days. Its function, in fact, is just the opposite of disciplinary spanking, as social drinking is the precise contrary of aversive therapy for alcoholics.

Though, like alcohol, it takes a while to learn to enjoy it, paddling helps make the initiation a Dionysian revel. It validated the initiate's sexual maturity. The active, slightly elder brothers, vigorously asserting their *droight de seigneur*, provided him with an unmistakable sense of his own potency and a powerful prophylaxis against the cold showers his parents and teachers were still recommending to reduce his new sexual urgency. In this way, the erogenous zones were declared officially open for business or pleasure, though some confusion might later arise about object-choice; sexuality's inconvenient links with violence, domination, and submission were unduly and unfortunately emphasized, along with the initiate's tendencies to become, like his brothers, a male chauvinist pig. They, of course, called this making a man of him.

Most of this is now happily behind us, as social taboos have shifted from the area of sex, the family has lost its authority and even some of its authoritarianism, colleges have begun declaring for open enrollment, and fraternities have given up the ghost even where they have retained the charter. Spanking, though children are still subject to it, has now become one of many techniques sex manuals recommend as possible ways for men and women get to know one another better. I have used this example despite its welcome obsolescence because it seems to me likely to be accessible to more readers—themselves I presume, largely reared and educated in an earlier era—and effective in making it clear why I think aversive therapy is fundamentally mean-spirited and hostile to life, however imposingly scientific it may appear and however unpleasant the behavior it seeks to modify may be.

Meanwhile, our conflicts have moved into other areas. Are there now schools in which teachers are positively reinforcing friendly contacts between white children and black, while programmatically ignoring or mildly discouraging the development of intra-ethnic friendships? I have not seen such a program described; but I wish I thought it more unlikely. Has anybody applied for a LEAA grant for a program in which policemen would shoot at effigies of black adolescents in apparent flight with a handgun designed to give them a nasty shock each time they pulled the trigger? I hope not. The brotherhood of man may be—probably is—a hopelessly unattainable vision; but it should be made of sterner stuff than a conditioned response.

Behavior modification provides some highly effective techniques for reducing the occurrence of undesirable behavior; and there is certainly plenty of it to be reduced. But it offers itself as an inauthentic substitute for love and will, and hence is essentially frivolous about existence. It may be, in some instances, a useful tool; but it leaves its practitioners in the moral predicament of having used a tool on people they should have responded to as total beings. That just isn't, in 1974, what we need more of.

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ANNE SEXTON:

# Light Up the Cave

Anne Sexton's death some weeks ago saddened a great many people. In addition, it startled those who had assumed that, despite all the troubles of which her poetry told, she had come to the long stretch of middle age with some reserves of strength; though—I am told—the friends who knew her best were confirmed in their fear that her determination towards suicide had not really been deflected. My own sadness at the death of a fellow poet is compounded by the sense of how likely it is that Anne Sexton's tragedy will not be without influence in the tragedies of other lives.

She herself was, obviously, too intensely troubled to be fully aware of her influence or to take on its responsibility. Therefore it seems to me that we who are alive must make clear, as she could not, the distinction between creativity and self-destruction. The tendency to confuse the two has claimed too many victims. Anne Sexton herself seems to have suffered deeply from this confusion, and I surmise that her friendship with Sylvia Plath had in it an element of identification which added powerfully to her malaise. Across the country, at differ-

ent colleges, I have heard many stories of attempted—and sometimes successful—suicides by young students who loved the poetry of Plath and who supposed that somehow, in order to become poets themselves, they had to act out in their own lives the events of hers. I don't want to see a new epidemic of the same syndrome occurring as a response to Anne Sexton's death.

The problem is not, however, related only to suicide *per se*. When Robert Lowell was at the height of his fame among student readers (his audience nowadays is largely an older one) many of them seemed to think a nervous breakdown was, if not imperative, at least an invaluable shortcut to artistry. When W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* won the Pulitzer Prize, young couples married and divorced, it seemed, especially in order to have the correct material to write about.

I am not being flippant. Innumerable young poets have drunk themselves into stupidity and cirrhosis because they admired John Berryman or Dylan Thomas and came to think they must drink like them to write like them. At the very least it is assumed that creativity and hangups are inevitably inseparable. One student (male)

said to me recently, "I was amazed when the first poet I met seemed to be a cheerful person and not any more fucked up than anyone else. When I was in high school I got the idea you *had* to be fucked up to be a real artist!" And a young English teacher in a community college told me she had given up writing poetry because she believed there were unavoidable links between depression and anxiety and the making of art. "Don't you feel terrible when you write poems?"

What exactly is the nature of the confusion, and how has it come about? The mistake itself lies in taking what may possibly be an occupational hazard as a prescriptive stimulus to artistic activity. Whether artists as a class are in fact more vulnerable than other people, or whether their problems merely have more visibility, a serious and intelligent statistical study might perhaps tell us. It makes no difference: the point is that while the creative impulse and the self-destructive impulse can, and often do, coexist, their relationship is distinctly acausal; self-destructiveness is a handicap to the life of art, not the reverse.

Yet it is the handicaps themselves that so often allure the young and un-