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SKINNER-BOXED: The Legacy of Behaviorism

For the anthropomorphic view of the rat, American psychology substituted a rattomorphic view of man.

— Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*

THERE IS A TIME to admire the grace and persuasive power of an influential idea, and there is a time to fear its hold over us. The time to worry is when the idea is so widely shared that we no longer even notice it, when it is so deeply rooted that it feels to us like plain common sense. At the point when objections are not answered anymore because they are no longer even raised, we are not in control: we do not have the idea; it has us.

This book is about an idea that has attained just such a status in our society. The idea is that the best way to get something done is to provide a reward to people when they act the way we want them to. Scholars have debated the meaning and traced the development of the intellectual tradition known as behaviorism. What interests me, though, is the popular (or pop) incarnation of this doctrine, the version that lives in our collective consciousness and affects what we do every day.

The core of pop behaviorism is “Do this and you’ll get that.” The wisdom of this technique is very rarely held up for inspection; all that is open to question is what exactly people will receive and under what circumstances it will be promised and delivered. We take for granted that this is the logical way to raise children, teach students, and manage employees. We promise bubble gum to a five-year-old if he keeps quiet in the supermarket. We dangle an A before a teenager to get her to study harder. We hold out the possibility of a Hawaiian vacation for a salesman who sells enough of the company’s product.

It will not take more than a few paragraphs to make the case that we are deeply committed to this way of thinking and behaving. But

my aim is considerably more ambitious. I want to argue that there is something profoundly wrong-headed about this doctrine — that its assumptions are misleading and the practices it generates are both intrinsically objectionable and counterproductive. This last contention in particular, that from a purely pragmatic point of view pop behaviorism usually fails to produce the consequences we intended, takes up most of the pages that follow.

To offer such an indictment is not to suggest that there is something wrong with most of the things that are used as rewards. It is not bubble gum itself that is the problem, nor money, nor love and attention. The rewards themselves are in some cases innocuous and in other cases indispensable. What concerns me is the practice of using these things *as* rewards. To take what people want or need and offer it on a contingent basis in order to control how they act — this is where the trouble lies. Our attention is properly focused, in other words, not on “that” (the thing desired) but on the requirement that one must *do this in order to get that*.

My premise here is that rewarding people for their compliance is not “the way the world works,” as many insist. It is not a fundamental law of human nature. It is but one way of thinking and speaking, of organizing our experience and dealing with others. It may seem natural to us, but it actually reflects a particular ideology that can be questioned. I believe that it is long past time for us to do so. The steep price we pay for our uncritical allegiance to the use of rewards is what makes this story not only intriguing but also deeply disconcerting.

Pigeons and Rodents and Dogs

Rewards were in use long before a theory was devised to explain and systematize their practice. John B. Watson suggested that behaviorism, of which he is known as the father, began with a series of lectures he gave at Columbia University in 1912. But a summary statement very similar to “Do this and you’ll get that” — the so-called Law of Effect, which states that behavior leading to a positive consequence will be repeated — was set out by psychologist Edward Thorndike back in 1898.¹ What’s more,

- One year before Watson’s lectures, Frederick W. Taylor published his famous book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, which described how tasks at a factory should be broken into parts, each assigned to a worker according to a precise plan, with financial rewards meted out to encourage maximum efficiency in production.²

- A full century earlier, a system developed in England for managing the behavior of schoolchildren assigned some students to monitor others and distributed tickets (redeemable for toys) to those who did what they were supposed to do.*

- For as long as animals have been domesticated, people have been using rudimentary incentive plans to train their pets.

In short, pop behaviorism might be said to predate and underlie behaviorism proper, rather than the other way around. But a few words about the more academic version, and the remarkable beliefs of its founders, will help us understand just what is involved when rewards are offered in everyday life.

Survivors of introductory psychology courses will recall that there are two major varieties of learning theory: classical conditioning (identified with Pavlov’s dogs) and operant, or instrumental, conditioning (identified with Skinner’s rats). Classical conditioning begins with the observation that some things produce natural responses: Rover salivates when he smells meat. By pairing an artificial stimulus with the natural one — say, ringing a bell when the steak appears — Rover comes to associate the two. Voilà — a response has been conditioned: the bell alone is now sufficient to elicit dog drool.†

Operant conditioning, by contrast, is concerned with how an action may be controlled by a stimulus that comes after it rather than before it. When a reward — Skinner preferred the term “reinforcement”⁴ — follows a behavior, that behavior is likely to be repeated. A good deal of research has refined and embellished this straightforward principle, focusing on such issues as how to time these rewards for best effect. But Skinnerian theory basically codifies and bestows solemn scientific names on something familiar to all of us: “Do this and you’ll get that” will lead an organism to do “this” again.

Virtually everyone who has thought about the matter agrees that both of these principles are useful for describing how some learning takes place. There is no shortage of familiar examples to flesh out the concepts. Anyone who has ever heard a toilet flush while taking a shower and immediately jumped backward provides a living illustra-

*This plan, similar to what would later be called a “token economy” program of behavior modification, was adopted by the first public school in New York City in the early years of the nineteenth century. It was eventually abandoned because, in the view of the school’s trustees, the use of rewards “fostered a mercenary spirit” and “engendered strifes and jealousies.”³

†Actually, Pavlov did not set out to investigate laws of behavior. He was studying the physiology of digestion when he noticed, at first to his annoyance, that the dog in his laboratory was drooling before being able to smell any meat.

tion of how one stimulus (a flushing sound) can come to be associated with another (scalding water). Anyone who has ever watched a child settle down in a hurry when promised a treat for doing so knows that rewards can affect behavior.

This book is more concerned with the second sort of learning, operant conditioning. To begin with, though, it focuses on a set of beliefs about this phenomenon and, by implication, about human beings. Skinnerians are not only interested in figuring out how rewards work; they are apt to argue that virtually everything we do — indeed, who we are — can be explained in terms of the principle of reinforcement. This is the essence of behaviorism, and it is the point of departure for our investigation.

B. F. Skinner could be described as a man who conducted most of his experiments on rodents and pigeons and wrote most of his books about people. This fact did not give him pause, because people to him were different from other species only in the degree of their sophistication. As a behaviorist sees it, you are more complex than a pigeon (in large part because you have vocal cords), but the theory of learning that explains how a bird trapped in a laboratory apparatus called a Skinner box comes to peck repeatedly at a disk also suffices to explain how you and I come to understand symbolism. “Man is an animal different from other animals only in the types of behavior he displays,” Watson announced on the very first page of *Behaviorism*,⁵ the book that convinced Skinner to become a psychologist. Thus it is that behaviorists speak sweepingly of how “organisms” learn.

For most of us, the existence of uniquely human capacities would raise serious questions about this theory. But Burrhus Frederic Skinner, who died in 1990 at the age of eighty-six, was not most people. One of the first things you realize when reading his books is that it is hard to offer an unfair caricature of the man’s views. It is also difficult to use the technique of *reductio ad absurdum* in challenging them. Critics have exclaimed, “But if that’s true, then here’s the [obviously ludicrous] conclusion that follows.” And instead of backpedaling and becoming flustered, Skinner would nod and cheerfully say, “Right you are.” For example, he insisted that organisms (including us, remember) are nothing more than “repertoires of behaviors,” and these behaviors can be fully explained by outside forces he called “environmental contingencies.” “A person is not an originating agent; he is a locus, a point at which many genetic and environmental conditions come together in a joint effect.”⁶ But this would seem to imply that

there is no “self” as we usually use the term, would it not? Yes indeed, replied Skinner.

But surely Fred Skinner the man — not the scientist, but the fellow who ate his breakfast and told a good joke and became lonely sometimes — surely *he* was a self. Amazingly, poignantly, he said no. In the epilogue to Skinner’s memoirs we read:

I am sometimes asked, “Do you think of yourself as you think of the organisms you study?” The answer is yes. So far as I know, my behavior at any given moment has been nothing more than the product of my genetic endowment, my personal history, and the current setting. . . . If I am right about human behavior, I have written the autobiography of a nonperson.⁷

Sure enough, over the course of four hundred pages, the book gives the impression that someone else is telling the story — someone who doesn’t care much about him, in fact. (His mother’s death is related without feeling, and the process of raising his two daughters is described as if it were one of Frederick Taylor’s efficiency studies.) This uncanny detachment permeated his life. “When I finished *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*,” Skinner once said, “I had a very strange feeling that I hadn’t even written the book. . . . [It] just naturally came out of my behavior and not because of anything called a ‘me’ or an ‘I’ inside.”*

Once the self has been dispatched, it requires only a minor mopping-up operation to finish off the features of being human that we treasure, such as creativity, love, morality, and freedom. Talking, after all, is only “verbal behavior,” and thinking is only silent talking.⁸ So it is not much of a reach to reduce creativity to a series of novel behaviors selected by the environment. “Beethoven,” Skinner said (or verbally behaved),

was someone who, when he was very young, acquired all the available music at the time, and then, because of things that happened to him personally as accidents and variations, he introduced new things which paid off beautifully. So he went on doing them, and he wrote because he was highly reinforced for writing. . . .

*This comment and other unattributed quotations that follow are taken from a series of interviews I conducted with Skinner in 1983 and 1984. Excerpts from those interviews are contained in Appendix A.

And love? Brace yourself. When two people meet,

one of them is nice to the other and that predisposes the other to be nice to him, and that makes him even more likely to be nice. It goes back and forth, and it may reach the point at which they are very highly disposed to do nice things to the other and not to hurt. And I suppose that is what would be called "being in love."⁹

Morality, for Skinner and other behaviorists, has been reduced to the question of whether society deems an action appropriate or inappropriate, adaptive or maladaptive; it is never inherently right or wrong.

To make a value judgment by calling something good or bad is to classify it in terms of its reinforcing effects. . . . The only good things are positive reinforcers, and the only bad things are negative reinforcers. . . . "You should (you ought to) tell the truth" . . . we might translate . . . as follows: "If you are reinforced by the approval of your fellow men, you will be reinforced when you tell the truth."¹⁰

Philosophers distinguish between this nonmoral use of the word *good* (as in "It's good to take out the trash before the bag gets too full") and a moral use ("It's good to tell the truth"). Skinner eliminated the latter altogether, collapsing it into the former.

His view of freedom, meanwhile, is better known since this is one of the two concepts behaviorism helps us to move beyond, according to the title of his best-selling book published in 1971. Some years ago, Skinner accepted my invitation to give a guest lecture at a class I taught. At the conclusion of his remarks, I couldn't resist a bit of flippant humor. "We certainly want to thank the environmental contingencies responsible for your being here this afternoon," I said. He didn't laugh. Smiling courteously, he replied, "I'm very glad they occurred."

Skinner believed that he had "chosen" to visit my class — and that all of us "choose" our actions — about as much as a rock in an avalanche chooses where to land. But then, the notion that a self freely decides is not likely to make much sense to a man who has repudiated the very idea of a self in the first place. If the rest of us presumptuously persist in talking about "intending" to do something, it is either because we derive comfort from thinking of ourselves as being in control or because we are ignorant, individually and collectively, of the forces that actually determine our behavior. Freedom's just another word for something left to learn: it is the way we refer to the ever-diminishing set of phenomena for which science has yet to specify the causes.¹¹

And now we have the key to understanding the essence of behaviorism: it proceeds from a boundless faith in science — and specifically, a narrowly defined version of science that never caught up with modern physics — to tell us everything we need to know. This is described by some philosophers as "scientism," by which is meant the assumption that all true knowledge is scientific knowledge. Human beings are to be analyzed in precisely the same way as we would analyze "a chemical compound or the way a plant grows," said Watson. If there are parts of our humanity beyond the grasp of science, so much the worse for those parts. Anything that is not observable, testable, and quantifiable either is not worth our time or does not really exist. Psychologists who talk about consciousness put Watson in mind of "the ancient days of superstition and magic."¹² If anything, Skinner was even more emphatic in articulating these ideas.

The consequence of patterning psychology after the natural sciences is predictable: psychology's subject matter (us) is reduced to the status of the subject matter of physics and chemistry (things). When we try to explain *things*, we appeal to causes. When most of us try to account for human behavior, though, we talk about reasons; a conscious decision, rather than an automatic response to some outside force, usually plays a role. But for Skinner, our actions, too, can be completely described in terms of causes. Freedom is just an illusion. Remember, there is no "self" to *be* free: what we are is nothing other than what we do. This is the belief that gives behaviorism its name.

It is not only academic behaviorists who believe that only measurable behavior is real. A few years ago, a group of businessmen accepted a researcher's offer of a free meal in exchange for their comments on her new psychological questionnaire. One of the men, on his third cigarette before dinner, was scornful of a question that referred to a "feeling of trust" in the workplace. He said he didn't understand what the word *trust* meant, apart from its most literal denotation: "I 'trust' that you are writing down what I'm saying right now." Later he spoke up to object to another item, this one asking whether "failure is acceptable if a good effort has been made." This, he declared, was a contradiction in terms; all that matters is measurable outcome, and if that is judged a failure, the effort by definition was not good enough. In fact, if it can't be quantified, it's not real.¹³ *But I would like to*

This view reflects a thoroughly American sensibility. It is no accident that behaviorism is this country's major contribution to the field of psychology, or that the only philosophical movement native to the United States is pragmatism. We are a nation that prefers acting to thinking, and practice to theory; we are suspicious of intellectuals,

worshipful of technology, and fixated on the bottom line. We define ourselves by numbers — take-home pay and cholesterol counts, percentiles (how much does your baby weigh?) and standardized test scores (how much does your child know?). By contrast, we are uneasy with intangibles and unscientific abstractions such as a sense of well-being or an intrinsic motivation to learn.

A thorough criticism of scientism would take us too far afield. But it is important to understand that practice does rest on theory, whether or not that theory has been explicitly identified. The overwhelming majority of teachers, according to one survey, are unable to name or describe a theory of learning that underlies what they do in the classroom,¹⁴ but what they do — what any of us does — is no less informed by theoretical assumptions just because these assumptions are invisible. Behind the practice of presenting a colorful dinosaur sticker to a first grader who stays silent on command is a theory that embodies distinct assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the possibility of choice, and what it means to be a human being. If the premises of behaviorism trouble us once they have been laid bare, perhaps that is an invitation to question the specific practices that rest on those premises.

Is it unfair to indict all of behaviorism on the basis of what Watson and Skinner had to say? Yes and no. It is true that they were more extreme than subsequent researchers and therapists on certain issues, such as the status of an inner life. Feelings, attitudes, and intentions were suspect to them — useless for explaining anything people do, completely determined by external factors, largely irrelevant to their version of psychology. In many intellectual movements, the pioneers are unreconstructed and immoderate; it is left to the next generation to temper and qualify and blend in what is useful from other theories. To some extent, behaviorism did move on while Skinner stood still. Long before his death, he was spinning in his house from what was being offered under the name of behavior therapy. (In his last paper, completed the night before he died, Skinner reiterated that “there is no place in a scientific analysis of behavior for a mind or self.”)¹⁵

But if more restrained and less quotable behaviorists have trimmed off the rough edges of Skinnerian psychology, they are carrying on a tradition that is fundamentally consistent with what I have been describing, at least with respect to the issues that matter most. They may have fastened on the finding that we also learn from watching other people receive rewards, or that attitudes as well as behaviors can be reinforced, but these are not decisive departures from Skinner with regard to what concerns us here.

More important, *we* can depart from Skinner at this point and begin to address ourselves to contemporary pay-for-performance plans in the workplace or the technique of pasting a gold star on a chart each time a child complies with her parents' demands. To repeat, this book is intended as a critique of these sorts of practices, of pop behaviorism rather than of Skinner, so whether the vision of a seamlessly controlled utopia like Walden Two chills you is beside the point. There is reason enough to be concerned once we reflect seriously on the implications of “Do this and you'll get that.”

Bring In the Reinforcements

Some social critics have a habit of overstating the popularity of whatever belief or practice they are keen to criticize, perhaps for dramatic effect. There is little danger of doing that here because it is hard to imagine how one could exaggerate the extent of our saturation in pop behaviorism. Regardless of political persuasion or social class, whether a Fortune 500 CEO or a preschool teacher, we are immersed in this doctrine; it is as American as rewarding someone with apple pie.

To induce students to learn, we present stickers, stars, certificates, awards, trophies, membership in elite societies, and above all, grades. If the grades are good enough, some parents then hand out bicycles or cars or cash, thereby offering what are, in effect, rewards for rewards. Educators are remarkably imaginative in inventing new, improved versions of the same basic idea. At one high school in Georgia, for example, students were given gold ID cards if they had an A average, silver cards for a B average, and plain white cards if they didn't measure up — until objections were raised to what was widely viewed as a caste system.¹⁶ This objection has not deterred a number of schools across the country from using a program that not only issues color-coded ID cards but also gets local merchants to offer discounts to students on the basis of their grade point average.¹⁷

A few years ago, some executive at the Pizza Hut restaurant chain decided — let us assume for entirely altruistic reasons — that the company should sponsor a program to encourage children to read more. The strategy for reaching this goal: bribery. For every so many books that a child reads in the “Book It!” program, the teacher presents a certificate redeemable for free pizza. This program and others like it are still in operation all over the country.

But why stop with edible rewards? Representative Newt Gingrich congratulated West Georgia College for paying third graders two dollars for each book they read. "Adults are motivated by money — why not kids?" he remarked, apparently managing to overcome the purported conservative aversion to throwing money at problems.¹⁸ Nor is the use of rewards confined to a particular ideology. Proposals to rescue American education, offered by public officials and corporate chieftains (the latter having been permitted a uniquely privileged role in this discussion), are uniformly behavioristic, regardless of whether they come from liberal Democrats or conservative Republicans. Politicians may quibble over how much money to spend, or whether to allow public funds to follow students to private schools, but virtually no one challenges the fundamental carrot-and-stick approach to motivation: promise educators pay raises for success or threaten their job security for failure — typically on the basis of their students' standardized test scores — and it is assumed that educational excellence will follow.

To induce children to "behave" (that is, do what we want), we rely on precisely the same theory of motivation — the only one we know — by hauling out another bag of goodies. At home, we offer extra time in front of the television or a special dessert or money when children comply with our requests. At school, teachers promise extra recess or special parties for obedient classes. In an Indiana elementary school, children demonstrating exemplary docility in the cafeteria are rewarded with a fancy dress-up meal.¹⁹ In a Texas junior high school, "excellent behavior" (defined as "any . . . act that the teacher deems appropriate") earns a "Good as Gold" card that entitles the holder to movie passes, T-shirts, or other prizes.²⁰

These examples can be multiplied by the thousands, and they are not restricted to children. Any time we wish to encourage or discourage certain behaviors — getting people to lose weight or quit smoking, for instance — the method of choice is behavioral manipulation. Thus, when several Planned Parenthood chapters wanted to get serious about teenage pregnancy, they naturally reached for the reinforcements, in this case by paying young mothers a dollar for every day they avoided getting pregnant again. "The Federal Government pays farmers not to plant crops," reasoned the psychologist who came up with the idea. "Why shouldn't we pay teenagers not to have babies?"²¹

American workplaces, meanwhile, are enormous Skinner boxes with parking lots. From the factory worker laboring for piecework pay to top executives prodded by promises of stock options, from special privileges accorded to Employees of the Month to salespeople

working on commission, the recipe always calls for behaviorism in full-strength concentrate. Depending on the size and type of the organizations surveyed and the way the question is framed, recent estimates of the number of U.S. companies using some form of incentive or merit-pay plan range from 75 to 94 percent, and many of these programs apparently have just been adopted during the last few years.²² The livelihood of a veritable herd of consultants is based on devising fresh formulas for computing bonuses or dreaming up new money substitutes to dangle in front of employees: vacations, banquets, special parking spaces, cute plaques — the list of variations on a single, simple model of motivation is limitless. To page through business books today is to encounter repeated assertions such as this one: "What gets measured, gets produced. What gets rewarded, gets produced again."²³ Magazines and journals offer more of the same. One article, entitled "If Employees Perform, Then Reward 'Em," declares flatly, "The more money you offer someone, the harder he or she will work."²⁴

No survey of the pervasiveness of pop behaviorism would be complete without mention of the one practice that is common to all arenas (school, work, and home) and used for all conceivable objectives (enhancing learning, improving productivity, and changing people's attitudes or behavior). I am speaking of praise, which Skinner called "the greatest tool in behavior modification." Books and seminars on parenting and classroom management urge adults to catch children doing something right and praise them for it — one article reminded mothers that "no matter how much [praise] you give, you can always give more"²⁵ — and corporate managers are offered similar advice. Even people who have concerns about piling on tangible rewards show no hesitation about the indiscriminate use of verbal rewards, which are, of course, another manifestation of the same principle. Approval or pleasure is often not merely expressed but doled out deliberately, conditionally, as part of a calculated strategy to shape others' behavior. (I will have more to say about the distinction between useful positive feedback and praise as an instrument of manipulation in chapter 6.)

Behind the Appeal of Behaviorism

Like most things that we and the people around us do constantly, the use of rewards has come to seem so natural and inevitable that merely

to pose the question, Why are we doing this? can strike us as perplexing — and also, perhaps, a little unsettling. On general principle, it is a good idea to challenge ourselves in this way about anything we have come to take for granted; the more habitual, the more valuable this line of inquiry.

It is not by accident that pop behaviorism has come to suffuse our lives. There are identifiable reasons to account for its popularity, beginning with the belief systems already in place which it complements. One of these I mentioned earlier: our pragmatism, and specifically our tendency to favor practical techniques for getting the job done as opposed to getting bogged down with theories and reasons. A nation of busy pioneers and entrepreneurs has no time for figuring out the source of a problem; much more compatible with the American spirit is a simple declaration that would seem to assure results: "Do this and you'll get that."

Promising goodies to people we want to change seems comfortably familiar to us because other traditions and beliefs are based on a similar way of thinking. It may seem a bit of a stretch to compare pay-for-performance plans to religious notions of redemption or enlightenment or karma, which are decidedly different from behaviorism, but the if-then contingency is just as salient in the latter set of ideas. We have been taught that ethical conduct will be rewarded and evil acts punished, even if it does not happen in this lifetime: "When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be . . . recompensed at the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14:13–14). We have also been taught that good acts or hard work *should* be rewarded, and this position, as I will argue later, leads some people to incline toward pop behaviorism regardless of the results it produces.

Ironically, rewards and punishments not only lie at the core of faith but are central to our idea of rationality as well, particularly as it makes its presence felt in economic choices. Rational decision-makers, by definition, are said to seek what is pleasurable and to avoid what is aversive or costly. Rationality, in turn, is central to what it means to be human, at least to many Western thinkers. A number of writers have recently challenged both steps of this argument, but pop behaviorism makes intuitive sense to us as a result of the assumptions built into our economic system.

In fact, behavioral psychology and orthodox economic theory have established a sort of mutual admiration society that flatters both fields, but only by creating a truncated picture of the human being

whose actions they seek to analyze. On the first pages of their textbooks, economists often nod in the direction of behaviorism to justify their fundamental assumptions about what motivates consumers or workers. Psychologists in turn assume that the process of weighing costs and benefits that describes how we go about purchasing an appliance is also what we are doing when talking with a lover. Among the features common to both disciplines, moreover, is the assumption that the reward-seeking, punishment-avoiding impulse that drives all our behavior is necessarily and exclusively dictated by self-interest.²⁶

What we believe in other contexts, then, from religion to economics, may pave the way for behaviorism by making us receptive to its premises. But what we see and do is also critical. What we see from our earliest days is the use of the carrot-and-stick model of motivation; most of us were raised this way, and it is easy to swallow such theories whole and pass along the practices to our own children. Many new parents are startled when they open their mouths and hear their own parents' expressions come out, right down to the inflection. But even those who want to know how their mothers managed to sneak into their larynxes may not recognize how they have also absorbed basic assumptions from which their approach to raising children derives.

Pop behaviorism is perpetuated through the example of other significant individuals in our lives, too, including teachers and powerful people in the workplace. Frederick Herzberg observed that managers who emphasize rewards and punishments "offer their own motivational characteristics as the pattern to be instilled in their subordinates. They become the template from which the new recruit to industry learns his motivational pattern."²⁷ More generally, if we constantly see people being manipulated with rewards, we may come not only to accept this as natural but also to assume the tactic can be generalized: if we pay adults for working, why not children for reading? And when we reward children, they may absorb the message that the way to get other people to do what they want is to bribe them.²⁸

Of course, our own experience with the use of rewards also helps to explain why we continue to use them. In a very limited sense — and just how limited is the subject of much of the rest of this book — rewards and punishments do work. In the short term, we can get people to do any number of things by making it worth their while. If I offer you an inducement that you find sufficiently rewarding, you will act in ways you would not otherwise consider. (Children, in fact, love

to entertain themselves by pondering just how much they would have to be paid to perform various unappetizing feats.) If I make the reward contingent on your not only doing what I want but doing it immediately or quickly or repeatedly, you may well comply. Rewards, like punishments, are very effective at producing compliance.

If you are a parent who has found that your children promptly make their beds when you promise them ice cream cones for doing so, you may conclude that rewards are effective. You may even decide that it is unrealistic to expect children to do such things if you don't use them. Research by Ann Boggiano and her colleagues has shown that American adults, including parents, are firm believers in rewards. Typically, it is assumed that rewards will increase children's interest in an academic assignment or their commitment to altruistic behavior. Even when presented with data indicating that the reverse is true, 125 college students in one experiment continued to insist that rewards are effective.²⁹ (As we shall see, some research psychologists who champion behaviorism are just as likely to wave away data that contradict what they are sure is true.)

Attend to your experience and you will notice not only that rewards work (in this very circumscribed sense), but also that they are marvelously easy to use. In the middle of a lecture on behaviorism a few years ago in Idaho, one teacher in the audience blurted out, "But stickers are so easy!" This is absolutely true. If she finds herself irritated that children in her class are talking, it takes courage and thought to consider whether it is really reasonable to expect them to sit quietly for so long — or to ask herself whether the problem might be her own discomfort with noise.³⁰ It takes effort and patience to explain respectfully to six-year-olds the reason for her request. It takes talent and time to help them develop the skill of self-control and the commitment to behave responsibly. But it takes no courage, no thought, no effort, no patience, no talent, and no time to announce, "Keep quiet and here's what you'll get. . . ."

Exactly the same is true in the office. Good management, like good teaching, is a matter of solving problems and helping people do their best. This too takes time and effort and thought and patience and talent. Dangling a bonus in front of employees does not. In many workplaces, incentive plans are used as a substitute for management: pay is made contingent on performance and everything else is left to take care of itself.³¹

Another way of framing this issue is to say that while authority figures can unilaterally dispense rewards, they must acknowledge their

lack of absolute control with respect to things like motivation. "Management can provide or withhold salary increments authoritatively, while it can only create conditions (or fail to) for individuals to achieve satisfaction of their higher-level needs," as Douglas McGregor put it.³² The same thing is true in the classroom or at home: there is comfort in sticking to what we have power over, and the use of punishments and rewards is nothing if not an exercise of power. All told, this may be the single most powerful reason to explain the popularity of pop behaviorism: it is seductively simple to apply.

But doesn't the widespread use of rewards suggest (contrary to what I have been promising to show in later chapters) that they work? Why would a failed strategy be preferred? The answer to this will become clearer, I think, when I explain exactly how and why they fail to work. For now, it will be enough to answer in temporal terms: the negative effects appear over a longer period of time, and by then their connection to the reward may not be at all obvious. The result is that rewards keep getting used.³³

By the same token (so to speak), it rarely dawns on us that while people may seem to respond to the goodies we offer, the very need to keep offering these treats to elicit the same behavior may offer a clue about their long-term effects (or lack of them). Whacking my computer when I first turn it on may somehow help the operating system to engage, but if I have to do that every morning, I will eventually get the idea that I am not addressing the real problem. If I have to whack it harder and harder, I might even start to suspect that my quick fix is making the problem worse.

Rewards don't bring about the changes we are hoping for, but the point here is also that something else is going on: *the more rewards are used, the more they seem to be needed*. The more often I promise you a goody to do what I want, the more I cause you to respond to, and even to require, these goodies. As we shall see, the other, more substantive reasons for you to do your best tend to evaporate, leaving you with no reason to try except for obtaining a goody. Pretty soon, the provision of rewards becomes habitual because there seems to be no way to do without them. In short, the current use of rewards is due less to some fact about human nature than to the earlier use of rewards.³⁴ Whether or not we are conscious that this cycle exists, it may help to explain why we have spun ourselves ever deeper into the mire of behaviorism.

Here, then, we have a portrait of a culture thoroughly and unreflectively committed to the use of rewards. They offer a temptingly simple

way to get people to do what we want. It is the approach we know best, in part because it likely governed how we ourselves were raised and managed. It fits neatly with other institutions and belief systems with which we are familiar. But aside from some troubling questions about the theory of behaviorism, what reason do we have for disavowing this strategy? That is the question to which we now turn.