18 An American Canard: The Freedom of (Therapeutic) Speech

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Whether imagined under domes, on ivied campuses, or in blood-drenched streets flooded with insistent chants and livid signs, the exercise of free speech in the United States is commonly understood as a decidedly public affair. Yet we should remember that, for decades, countless Americans have been exhorted to verbally reveal what they really think and how they really feel – or *speak freely* – in the relative privacy of professional psychotherapy sessions.[1] To be sure, in the United States, free speech is not just a sign of a healthy democracy but also an act and evidence of healthy personhood. Accordingly, American individuals are regularly evaluated and sometimes putatively cured by speech that apparently springs forth from inner selves, unfettered by the authority of others. As I've argued in other work, American psychotherapies are especially revealing sites to examine how ideals of free speech – and the semiotic ideologies that underlie them – are reproduced, managed, and even distilled (cf. Carr 2011, 2023).

While the reader may doubt the suggestion that we can learn about the politics of free speech by looking at the dynamics of psychotherapies, many prominent American psychologists lend credence to this thesis. For instance, consider how father of client-centred therapy, Carl Rogers, laced the keywords of American democracy – or what Nancy Fraser calls "folk paradigms of justice" (Fraser and Honneth 2003) – through the description of his therapeutic program. More specifically, Rogers (1961) conceived of himself as creating the dialogic conditions

1 As the opening dome-to-bloody street metaphor means to signal, Americans' access to psychotherapy as a more-or-less productive site of expression or reformation has always been radically classed, racialized, and gendered. Consider – just for example – those who voluntarily access something like client-centred therapy in the confines of insurance-covered therapists' offices relative to those who are relinquished, court-ordered, or otherwise mandated to psychological care. As Susan Gal (2002) has noted, the semiotic production and reinforcement of the public/private distinction is always a matter of other lines of difference.

for clients to see themselves as free and to speak accordingly, a therapeutic project that he called "self-actualization." That this project coincided with growing anti-authoritarian sentiment, stoked by the Cold War on the one hand, and global challenges to white supremacy and colonialism on the other, was no accident.

On a mild June day in 1962, in front of an audience of at least 500 students, faculty, and onlookers gathered at the University of Minnesota Duluth, the famous psychologist seized upon this growing sentiment and framed his therapeutic program in triumphantly democratic terms. Referencing current events, from civil rights and decolonization movements to Westerners' growing interest in existentialism and Zen Buddhism, Rogers noted:

> As I endeavor to understand this vigorous new cultural trend, it seems to me to be the voice of subjective man speaking up loudly for himself. Man has long felt himself to be a puppet in life, molded by world forces, by economic forces. He has been enslaved by persons, by institutions, and, more recently, by aspects of modern science. But he is firmly setting for a new declaration of independence. He is discarding the alibis of "unfreedom." He is choosing himself, endeavoring to become himself: not a puppet, not a slave, not a copy of some model, but his own unique self. I find myself very sympathetic to this trend because it is so deeply in line with the experience I have had working with clients in therapy. As one therapist has said, the essence of therapy is the client's movement from feeling unfree and controlled by others to the frightening but rewarding sense of freedom to map out and choose his new personality. (*Dialogue* 1976)[2]

Here, we see how Roger scales up from the clinical to the political by way of recognizably democratic ideals. We can hear echoes of Fanon, if in less elegant and more ambiguously racialized terms, as Rogers avers that "man" has been "enslaved" "by persons, by institutions, and … by aspects of modern science," uniformly cast as "alibis of unfreedom." Notably, therapy and therapists – or at least ones working in the Rogerian vein – are exempted from this

2 The 1962 debate was titled, "A Dialogue on Education and the Control of Human Behavior," which was recorded and released by the American Academy of Psychotherapists. It was eventually transcribed, and reprinted in Kirschenbaum and Henderson (1989), though the transcriptions here and that follow are my own, based on the AAP recordings (Rogers and Skinner 1976) and cited herein as *Dialogue* 1976. Kirschenbaum (1979) details the format of the debate in his intellectual biography, *On Becoming Carl Rogers*. He explains that it allowed for fifteen minutes of opening remarks by each man, followed by seventy-five minutes of discussion. The first evening was capped by a discussion by an invited panel and small group discussion among audience members. The next morning, Skinner and Rogers resumed for another seventy-five-minute session, took an hour of questions from the audience, and offered brief closing remarks.

conglomerate of tyrannical forces, framed instead as paving the way for "clients' movement from feeling unfree and controlled by others to the frightening but rewarding sense of freedom" (*Dialogue* 1976). No longer "puppets" nor "slaves," "unique selves" set forth from the Rogerian therapeutic encounter psychically prepared to speak freely, even "declar[e] their independence," as autonomous and healthy-minded Americans. In these paradigmatically democratic terms, Rogers spent the next two days outlining his central therapeutic premise, elaborated over his many writings (e.g., Rogers 1946, 1951, 1961, 1980), that clients will "self-actualize" so long as professionals abstain from (overt) evaluation and direction. And, as he repeatedly implied, client speech – once liberated from professional influence – was both the means and the evidence of their democratic/therapeutic development.

Sitting across from Rogers on the Minnesotan stage was the equally famous, if far more controversial American psychologist, B.F. Skinner.[3] Over the course of the debate, the men offered starkly divergent epistemological premises about and attendant ethical positions on the locus of human behaviour, the nature of language, and the proper ground of psychology, frequently trading razor-sharp barbs. Doubtlessly emboldened by the support of the university-based audience, Rogers spared no time going on the attack, associating Skinner's behaviourism with authoritarianism and repeatedly suggesting that the freedom of speech and therefore the liberty of subjects was at stake in Americans' choices of interventions. Certainly, what Rogers idealized as unencumbered self-expression, Skinner (1957) understood as verbal behaviour that is always shaped by the environment, past and present, including one's immediate interlocutors. The behaviourist focused on engineering ideal – even utopian – environments, where speech was valued for the quality of associations and interactions it helped forge – or, for what speech communally produced rather than what it individually expressed. So, whereas Rogers's brand of psychotherapy was premised on the idea that the professional, as an external authority, should minimally influence what clients say so as to understand their speech as free, Skinner maintained that ethical professionals should consciously and explicitly help craft conditions, or positively reinforce, speech and other behaviour.

Though the Rogers-Skinner debate highlighted, even diagrammed, several fundamental and enduring contradictions in American democracy, in this

3 This was the third, and the most intensive, of the public engagements between the two men. It was organized by University of Minnesota Duluth students who – having learned that Skinner would be receiving an honorary degree at a nearby college and thus travelling to the area from his post at Harvard – invited Rogers, who was then teaching at the nearby University of Wisconsin-Madison, to join Skinner for a "dialogue." It was apparently important to the organizers that the event be relatively unscripted and provide opportunity for impromptu discussion between the men and with the audience (Kirschenbaum 1979).

chapter, I am especially interested in Skinner's evocation of a canard: a fabrication at the heart of the cherished ideal of free speech and a telling theme in his exchange with Rogers. In short, Skinner suggested that *speech is "free" only to the extent that the social circumstances of its production are obscured from view*.

The remainder of this chapter elaborates on this charge. I argue that in the debate between these two American psychologists, we can discern the ideological labour involved in making American speech apparently free and evaluate the costs of doing so.[4]

Delving into the terms of the debate and drawing as needed on the two psychologists' respective published works, I focus on how Rogers's highly conventional formulations about language and its functions squared with his those of his opponent. Writing against "mentalist" approaches, Skinner worried that asocial conceptions of language have limited, even dangerous, political utility. Presaging his 1971 treatise, which argued that the American tendency to attribute causality to the individual hindered both science and politics, including efforts to build a just society that optimizes and equalizes people's ability to thrive, Skinner asked Rogers – and the legions of Americans who shared his views – to think "beyond freedom and dignity" when it comes to questions of speech (Skinner 1971).

Free Speech: Duck or Rabbit?

The Rogers-Skinner debate was charged in large part because neither of the psychologists were the least bit shy about embracing the practical and political implications of their disciplinary concerns.[5] If they agreed on little else, both readily conceded that the psychological is political, if with some notable caveats.[6]

Consider, too, that in mid-twentieth-century America, political questions were commonly couched in psychological terms, with many Americans

4 On the *metalinguistic labour* involved in a genealogically connected American therapeutic project, see Carr (2006, 2011, 2021).

5 Both Rogers and Skinner ran active research labs and did not hesitate to generalize their findings to actual practice (Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989). However, Skinner – unlike Rogers – was not a practising psychotherapist; he nevertheless was keenly interested in the practical implications of his theory of behaviour, especially in the field of education. As in therapy, Skinner argued, the teacher's job is "to … shape behavior – to build it up and strengthen it, rather than to find it already in the student and draw it out [as Rogers claims]" (Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, 118).

6 For instance, Skinner certainly would have objected to the idea that his lab experiments were mediated by politics as much as Rogers declined to see the directive and even authoritative elements of his therapeutic style.

viewing the Cold War as a battle between the safeguarding of freedom of thought and the active suppression of it. B.F. Skinner's radical behaviourism was commonly associated with the latter tendency, and not just by the FBI who assembled an ample file on the social scientist (see Wyatt 2000), but also by his scholarly colleagues who increasingly regarded Skinner's scholarly program as narrow and rigid (Cohen-Cole 2014, 124–5; see also Hull 2010, 258).[7]

Rogers was certainly among the most critical of those colleagues, whose suspicions of Skinner seemed as grave, if not as potentially consequential, as those of federal authorities. As the father of client-centred therapy put it on that stage in Duluth during his lengthy opening remarks, which he prepared in advance of the debate:

> … to the extent that the behaviorist point of view in psychology is leading us toward a disregard of the person … toward the control of the person by shaping his behavior without his participant choice, or toward minimizing the significance of the subjective … I question it very deeply. My experience leads me to say that such a point of view is going against one of the strongest undercurrents in modern life and is taking us down a pathway with destructive consequences. (*Dialogue* 1976)

The displacement of the individual will as causal agent, of course, was profoundly disturbing to Rogers whose therapeutic program depended on the idea that people should be authors of their own acts, and their behaviour traceable to sources within themselves (i.e., "participant choice").[8] Throughout the debate, Rogers repeatedly returned to the idea that "minimizing the significance of the subjective" is as much of an anathema to politics as it is to psychotherapy.

Later in the debate, Skinner would more directly counter this formulation. He would also, with remarkable poise and precision, defend his own program and position. However, demonstrating that he was an astute student of verbal behaviour, Skinner began the debate by commenting on its very own (operant) conditions. He placed particular emphasis on the rhetorical force of his

7 Nevertheless, Skinner's ideas enjoy continued influence if in modified form. To be sure, the third wave behavioural therapies have enjoyed tremendous success, having been widely institutionalized and trained, though they typically restore some notion of a willful interiority – "cognitively" or otherwise – that radical behaviourists were criticized for evacuating. By contrast, since the mid-twentieth century, Rogerian therapy has been relatively uncontroversial, and virtually synonymous with ethically sound, politically progressive psychotherapeutic practice.

8 Note that Rogers was in seminary before earning his PhD in psychology. Whether or not the soul was in question for Rogers, he was deeply invested in the idea that the course of individual action is driven from within.

opponent, bolstered as it was by the conventional assumptions about language, autonomy and interiority that Rogers shared with the audience. After genteelly greeting the moderator and his opponent, who had clearly come out swinging, Skinner wryly noted:

> I always make the same mistake. In debating with Carl Rogers, I always assume that he will make no effort to influence the audience. [*Laughter from audience*] And then I have to follow him and speak, as I am speaking now, to a group of people who are very far from free to accept my views. [*Loud and extended laughter from audience*] In fact, I was just reminded of a story that I once heard about Carl Rogers, and I will tell it now hoping to confirm or have him deny it. I suppose it is apocryphal. At least I'm sure it has grown in its dimensions. (*Dialogue* 1976)

Note how, before recounting the story, Skinner diagrams his critique of Rogers's premises about the freedom of speech. He swiftly dismisses any implication that the debate is simply the ideas of two men spontaneously spilling out of their heads into words, which then simply flow from the stage into the audience. Instead, Skinner craftily points to the rhetorical dimensions of Rogers's opening statement, noting how – despite protestations to the contrary – the father of client-centred therapy is quite adept at influencing others when he speaks. In a backhanded compliment, he goes further to suggest that Rogers is so persuasive that he has effectively conditioned the audience to be "very far from free to accept [Skinner's] views." Judging from their laughter, the irony was not lost on the audience. And while some may have thought it unfair to compare the conditions of public debate and ostensibly private therapeutic exchange, Rogers opened that door himself by claiming that his "experience working with clients" resonated with, and perhaps even exemplified the cultivation of the freedom of American speech and speakers. Skinner continued:

> The story as I heard it is as follows: Carl Rogers was never much of a duck hunter, but he was persuaded upon one occasion to go duck hunting. Uh, he and some friends went into a blind and sat through a dreary cold early dawn, and no ducks arrived until the very end of the time when shooting was possible. Finally, one lone duck came in, and his friends allowed him to shoot, and he did. At the same time, along the shore a few hundred yards away, another man shot at the same duck. The duck fell. Plop! Dr. Rogers got out of the blind and started toward the duck. The other man got out of his blind and started toward the same duck. They arrived at the same moment. Dr. Rogers turned to him and said, "You *feel* that this is *your duck*." [*Loud, widespread laughter*] (*Dialogue* 1976)

Part of why Skinner's story is so funny is because it restages a classically Rogerian engagement well outside the confines of the therapy room, if still

within an ostensibly dyadic exchange. As the audience clearly recognized, the tale's narrative climax – "You *feel* that this is *your duck*" – is a signature Rogerian *reflection*, a tentative statement about an interlocutor's feelings. In Rogerian therapy, such reflections serve as denotative checkpoints, opportunities to assess "whether [the therapist's] understanding of the client's inner world is correct" (Rogers 1986, 375).

Indeed, reflections are arguably the central technology of Rogers' highly influential approach to psychotherapy. According to the legions of American psychotherapists who make prominent use of the Rogerian-style speech act today, reflections are superior to questions, which can appear probing and diagnostic. They are also preferred to directives, which baldly project professional authority. That said, as tentative guesses, much like questions in intonational disguise, reflections (like "you *feel* this is *your duck*") both elicit more speech and, when skillfully placed within therapeutic dialogue, can also *direct* that speech, prompting the client to elaborate, equivocate, and revise what they are about to say in particular ways (see Carr 2021, 2023). As Skinner might put it, reflections are more-or-less positive reinforcements – operant conditions which his opponent misrecognized or refused to acknowledge.

Just a few years after the debate, Rogers's own students confirmed Skinner's humour-veiled charge, finding evidence for the directive nature of Rogers's "reflective listening." Transcribing and analyzing their former professor's psychotherapy sessions, they showed how Rogers selectively reinforced some client statements, while remaining silent in the face of others (Traux 1966; Traux and Carkhuff 1967). Audaciously, Traux (1966, 1) not only found "significant reinforcement effects in client-centered therapy," he also framed this as a point scored for Skinner, writing, "the findings suggest that the therapist, in this case Rogers, implicitly alters (or controls) the patient's behaviour in the therapeutic setting. To this extent, then, the evidence weighs in favour of the view proposed by Skinner rather than Rogers" (7). In other words, Rogers's students suggested, reflections are an effective, if highly subtle – and perhaps even surreptitious – means of acquiring a proverbial duck.

This research flew directly in the face of Rogers's (1947, 359) claim that the client-centred therapist "helps maximize the freedom of expression by the individual." After all, Rogers claimed that to offer verbal direction is to interfere with the process of self-actualization and, by extension, to violate the principle of individual freedom. His students' research also contradicted his own studies of client-centred therapy transcripts, summarized in his 1947 address as the retiring president of the American Psychological Association and later published in *American Psychologist*. There, Rogers (1947, 358) claimed that it was a "fortunate characteristic" of the recordings that he studied "that the verbal productions of the client are biased to a minimal degree by the therapist." He even went so far to claim that "material

from client-centered interviews probably comes closer to being a 'pure' expression of attitudes than has been achieved by other means" (358).[9] As we will see, Skinner would proceed to disabuse his opponent from this claim, and – moreover – the very possibility of "pure" expression. What patients say in therapy, Skinner would argue, is always influenced by their professional interlocutor, whether that interlocutor denies it or not. This is not only because speech is inherently interactional, and even the most subtle verbal cues spawn responses in others; it is also because the authority structure of professional exchanges and cultural norms of comportment in and out of the therapy room shape what people say and otherwise do.[10]

Indeed, the duck story is all-the-more effective because it parodies a way of approaching interaction that is blind to a whole host of salient features of the environment in which that interaction takes place. In this case, the duck-hunting in Rogers's reflection circumvents all the features of the duck hunt as a set of conditions in a communally shared environment, in which one might make and lay claims (e.g., that Rogers "was never much of a duck hunter"; that the day was dreary, cold, and virtually duckless; that Rogers's friends had "allowed him to shoot" once a duck finally arrived; that there were several other blinds from behind which other and likely more experienced hunters shot; that there were a set of structuring norms and social dynamics of duck hunting, including competitive ones). Rogers's reported reflection evacuates these conditions, channelling them into an affirmative statement of what his duck hunting opponent *feels*, which Rogers claims to both immediately recognize and apparently decline to counter.[11] Yet, as the audience's roar was soon to signal, Skinner's punchline was yet to come. He continued:

> The reason that I was reminded of that story was that the *end* of it is that Dr. Rogers brought the duck home. [*More loud laughter*] I shall do my best to prevent a similar outcome. [*Skinner joins in audience's laughter*] (*Dialogue* 1976)

9 Rogers (1947, 358) immediately added, in a dazzling spin of his data: "One can read through a complete recorded case or listen to it without finding more than a half-dozen instances in which the therapist's views on any point are evident."

10 As Benjamin Smith (2005, 264) puts it, "the participant structure of a Rogerian session tends toward the complete collapse of anything beyond whatever roles are established via the client's speech."

11 Apparently, Rogers later commented that he thought the duck hunting story was confined to his family, and expressed wonder at how Skinner had ever heard word of it (Kirschenbaum 1979). At the debate, Rogers conceded, "there's a great deal of truth in story," while correcting what he recognized as the "punchline": he and the other duck hunter had "resorted to a procedure very highly regarded in scientific circles – we flipped a coin, and that proved that I had shot the duck" (*Dialogue* 1976).

If a witty and dismissive way to follow Rogers's strident opening treatise, the implication is quite a serious one. That is, Rogers's style of professional interaction and his approach to politics is not naïve but sneakily manipulative, allowing the storied therapist-hunter to take the (proverbial) duck home. Indeed, by way of the duck story, Skinner raised the question of just what his opponent may be hiding, suggesting that even the most putatively unmediated "ways of being with people" have directive elements, whether the practitioner admits it or not (Carr 2023). And, as the debate continued, Skinner would return repeatedly, if often implicitly, to the suggestion at the heart of the duck story: that the production of one democratic ideal – *freedom of speech* – too often depends on the suppression of another – *transparency in governance.*

Cold War, Cold Therapies

Skinner's duck story was a clever way to humorously pad his trenchant critique of Rogers, which he proceeded to elaborate on over the course of the debate. It was also a remarkably cool response to some very serious, even threatening, charges on the part of his opponent. After all, in his opening statement, Rogers had not only implied that Skinner was "pathetic" but had also figured the behaviourist as decidedly anti-American.[12] Indeed, before his opponent even had a chance to speak, Rogers had swiftly inventoried the democratic ideals, beginning with freedom and ending with personal responsibility that Skinner's behaviourism presumably violated:

> Here are some of the words and concepts that I have used which are almost totally without meaning in the behaviorist frame of reference: *freedom* is a term with no meaning; *choice,* in the sense I have used it, has no meaning … *Purpose, self-direction, value* or *choice* – none of these has any meaning; *personal responsibility* as a concept has no meaning. (*Dialogue* 1976)

Significantly, for the most part, Skinner did not shy away from what supposed to be an incriminating characterization of his views, loaded up as they were with social salience.[13] At one point, Skinner even confessed, "I don't believe in the notion of personal responsibility," underscoring that all

12 Specifically, Rogers stated: "Some of the most pathetic individuals I know are those who continually attempt to understand and predict their behavior objectively" (*Dialogue* 1976). Not surprisingly, Skinner seemingly declined to take the insult personally.

13 Skinner later added that it was therefore exceedingly difficult for American psychologists to understand people from "other areas of the world" who did not share this peculiar conception of self (*Dialogue* 1976).

behaviour – including speech – is always co-produced and environmentally conditioned. More specifically, while Skinner made clear that people should be held accountable for the consequences of acts that they could reasonably foresee, he unashamedly confirmed Rogers's charge that "when people have been induced to behave in particular ways, without aversive consequences entering into the picture, there is no meaning to the conception of personal responsibility" (*Dialogue* 1976).

Of course, Skinner was keen to the fact that Rogers's critical characterization of behaviourism reflected the "national tendency … to suppose that the individual … has something inside himself which is very important. (*Dialogue* 1976). Nevertheless, as a devout empiricist, Skinner eschewed all attempts to find causes within the black box of individual psyches, instead seeking explanations for behaviour in the observable history of interaction.[14] Thus, in response to Rogers, Skinner bemoaned that his colleagues fetishized autonomous purpose, inferring "inner processes" *as cause* and thereby systematically overlooking the contextual factors that shaped the course and consequences of human behaviour. These views made him not just a behaviourist, but a decidedly radical one as well. And while acknowledging that "strangely enough, it is the community that teaches this individual to "know himself" (Skinner 1953, 261), as if this project was of the highest ethical order, Skinner maintained that causality – and therefore the possibility for freedom – was to be found in the history of behavioural interactions and not within people (cf. Bateson 1971; Foucault 1977; Johnson 1988; Latour 2005).

In this sense, Skinner was arguably quite broad in his view of psychology, focusing as he did on the environmental conditions, past and present, that produced behaviour, as well as on the pragmatics of how problem behaviour might be conditioned otherwise. In the lab, Skinner had found that observable historical reinforcements that produced extant behaviours; as a utopian, he imagined how interaction might be otherwise engineered. He was therefore steadfast in his thesis that "man … [is] the product of past elements and forces and the determined cause of future events and behaviors," and that "isolating the originating event [of behavior] as something to do with inner experience" was a methodological error with profound real-world implications (*Dialogue* 1976; see also Skinner 1953, 1971). So, as the debate went on, Skinner made clear that more than a pilfered duck was at stake. By the second day in Duluth, he was working to make clear that mentalism – exemplified by Rogers if shared by most of their American audience – was not just a psychological error

14 Importantly, this did not mean that Skinner denied the existence or experience of inner life; rather, Skinner resisted its epistemological primacy.

but a political one as well. After all, political economic conditions shape who experiences what kind of problems and punishments, making freedom and freedom of speech a deeply stratified affair. And while Skinner didn't explicate the raced, classed, and gendered nature of operant conditions, his experiments – including his labour-saving "baby box" (see below) – suggest that he understood that "self-actualization" was not just an epistemologically problematic goal, but one that set many up for failure by not attending to stark differences in the environmental shaping of human subjects.

So while speech could never be "free" for Skinner, he also acknowledged that it is freer for some than others and accordingly imagined remedies for such inequities. Notably, here, we should consider that Skinner was deeply attuned to the question of reflexive calibration of social interaction, and particularly social interventions, such as early education and psychotherapy. Having spent his career demonstrating that all animals can learn – he taught pigeons to play ping pong and dance, after all – Skinner asserted that a distinguishing feature of humans, as a kind of animal, is our capacity for reflection. At baseline, this means we can observe the consequences of our own responses to a set of environmental stimuli and, when yielding unpleasant or harmful responses in others, reorient and anticipate how to respond differently in the future. Denying one's part in the ongoing orchestration of social life is to deny responsibility *for others*.

Skinner used his own reflections on his scholarly behaviour as an example, refusing to attribute his momentous academic achievements to his own mental attributes, despite his critics' frequent goading. Indeed, when asked during a video-recorded interview in his office at Harvard University if as author of his own writings he should take credit for them, an eighty-four-year-old Skinner went on to detail the operant conditions that allowed him, with reflection, to be productive as a scholar – the arrangement of his desk, the time of day in which he set to work, the presence or absence of others – suggesting all those conditions were as responsible for scholarly production as he, as an individual organism, was himself (Skinner 1988). His achievement was only in reflecting and experimenting with these conditions. (Along the same lines, Rogers repeatedly baited Skinner at each one of their meetings whether he was simply "emitting sounds" because "his past environment had operantly conditioned his behavior in such a way that it was rewarding to make those sounds," to which Skinner cheerfully replied that he thought Rogers's "characterization" of his presence was "very close" indeed) (*Dialogue* 1976).

Part of Skinner's point was that too many individuals were ready to take undue credit for the fortunes of their environmental conditions – particularly, perhaps, white male academic luminaries like he and his opponent in Duluth. In an "effective world," Skinner later continued, "the reasons for admiring will disappear" (*Dialogue* 1976). Acknowledging that many would feel this as a

loss, Skinner maintained that we should evaluate our responses in terms of the good they produce in the world rather than in the myopic terms of personal achievement. For instance, Skinner explained that if someone were to provide evidence that his words or actions were angry ones, he would take that seriously and work to adjust his responses in the future. Indeed, this sort of reflective calibration to the flow of human behaviour was not an exercise in "self-control" as much as a matter of personal ethics. For Skinner, it was rather a way of being responsive to others, the community of actors who shape and are shaped by one's actions, including one's words.

Yet there was even more at stake in clinging to mentalist explanations of social exchange. Skinner also implied that the failure to reflect or acknowledge the influence one had on others was a pathway to potential tyranny. After all, the flipside of taking personal credit for environmentally produced achievements is holding certain individuals accountable for environmentally produced problems. Here, claims to have transparent access to the interiors of individuals – such as Rogers's (1947, 360) assertion that he had been "admitted freely into the backstage of the person's living" and that he had "repeatedly peered through … psychological windows into the personality" (360) – could get dangerous, particularly when in the wrong hands. Locating problems within personalities rather than within behaviour could and regularly did lead to stigma, stratification and unjust punishment, enduring concerns that Skinner worked to address over the course of his career. Being reflexive, then, means being aware of and precise about how one's own responses affect others, particularly if one is in an authoritative position. Especially concerned about the dangers of blind authority, Skinner conducted and imagined experiments with the firm conviction that no human intervention should have surreptitious elements.

From the beginning to the end of the two-day debate, Skinner remained unmoved from his thesis "the inner events which seem so important to us are not essential to action and probably do not, in any important case, precede action" (*Dialogue* 1976). And whereas Rogers (1946, 416) insisted that therapists accept the "principle that the individual is basically responsible for himself," Skinner (1953, 382–3) made it clear that the goal of interventions is precisely to direct, or positively "condition" people to act in responsible ways relative to others. Thus, for Skinner, the pressing question was not *whether* to direct people, but how to do so in positive, productive, and non-punitive ways. This question drove the history of Skinner's experiments – including utopian ones – which would add fuel to the firestorm of criticism. Importantly, those experiments hinged on a theory of language that sought to relocate the freedom of speech from more-or-less liberated American individuals to more-or-less receptive, cooperative American communities wherein people were free to the extent they could exercise reflexive self-control.

Skinner's Utopia: Beyond the Autonomous Speaker in the Freedom of Speech

Perhaps Skinner's placid demeanour throughout the debate derived from the fact that he was no stranger to virulent criticism, especially after the 1948 publication of his utopian novel, *Walden Two.* In it, Skinner imagined a community where punishment had no place, gender equality reigned, and positive reinforcement of children began at birth, with the aim of fostering self-control and cooperation and eliminating competitive individualism. Prominent critics cast this unapologetic behaviourism not just as anti-democratic but as distinctly un-American as well (Nye 1992; Richelle 1993; Rutherford 2006). Across his many public-facing writings, Skinner's central thesis of *operant conditioning* was commonly received as an attack on the cherished ideal that American individuals are authors of their own acts, whose participation in public life is unmediated by external authorities. Some went so far as to translate operant conditioning as "another word for Nazism" (Lancelot quoted in Richelle 1993, 4).[15]

While historians argue that the skepticism of experts reached new heights post–Second World War, the American public's critique of expert authority was quite selective. Thus, while readers were lapping up Dr. Spock's now infamous child-rearing advice, they chafed at the *Ladies Home Journal* article in which Skinner described the "air crib" that he designed for the care of his second baby daughter and for his wife, whose maternal labour he was motivated to save (see Skinner 1945). The air crib was enclosed, like the traditional crib, with three opaque sides and a plexiglass front that allowed the baby visual stimulation but also provided light and sound control. Equipped with a rotating linen-like plastic sheet, the crib also diminished the amount of laundry generated and therefore parental labour required (Nye 1992). Some critics charged that the "baby box" (as the title of the *Ladies Home Journal* article dubbed it) was simply a larger version of the box Skinner had created for his pigeons (see Bjork 1997). And while others may have bristled at the feminism of the invention, the air crib was also undoubtedly controversial for simply drawing attention to extant conventions of infant control.

Arguably, Skinner's conception of freedom was implicit in the crib's design. While it obviously – like other cribs – confined its infant inhabitants, it

15 As Rutherford (2006) adroitly explains, this criticism co-existed with ample application of Skinnerian ideas about behaviour modification across numerous fields. And while third-wave behavioral therapies – like cognitive behavioural therapy – have enjoyed tremendous success, in part because of their relative efficiency and cost-effectiveness, they have been cleansed of the most politically problematic implications of Skinner's radicalism, most centrally his displacement of an internal motor of human action (see Carr 2023).

maximized opportunity for their stimulation and comfort. Just as importantly, it freed mothers from the more unpleasant tasks of caregiving, suggesting that one actor's freedoms hinge on others. In other words, Skinner's air crib indicated that freedom was a feature of the interaction of mother, child, and crib, buoyed by the elimination of more averse if implicit methods of control.

Interestingly, especially vitriolic commentary arose around Skinner's use of the word "experiment" in the article, which appeared to turn his own daughter into an object of his expertise and to even suggest that human babies, like any other animal (read: pigeon), could be positively conditioned given an ideal environment. As the vaguely understood nature of Skinner's scientific program of behaviourism coalesced with the public focus on the externally uninhibited cultivation of open American minds (Cohen-Cole 2014), the directive nature of Skinner's child-rearing, labour-saving device was considered problematic while Dr. Spock's pointers on child rearing remained implicit and normatively acceptable.

Over the course of several decades, a tellingly broad range of prominent political figures expressed outrage over Skinner's rejection of the ideal of the sovereign will and the free-thinking subject, as well as his interest in designing environments to stimulate pro-social behaviour. For instance, within months of Noam Chomsky's (1971, 22) scathing review of Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* in the *New York Review of Books*, which compared a Skinnerian world to "a well-run [if punishment free] concentration camp," Spiro Agnew (1972, 22) issued a warning to the American public that "Skinner attacks the very precepts on which our society is based" and seeks to perform "radical surgery on the national psyche" – a psyche that the Cold War American public increasingly insisted should be recognized, not directed.[16]

As an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Chomsky had other bones to grind with Skinner as well. After all, Skinner (1957, 2) understood speech as "behavior reinforced through the mediation of other persons," which could deal a substantial blow to the young linguist's emerging theory of universal grammar. Skinner's 1957 book, *Verbal Behavior*, was interested in the conditions, including community-specific norms and as well as speech of other speakers, that shape the actual production of verbal behaviour (familiar fodder for linguistic anthropologists, one might say). *Verbal Behavior* can also be read as a sustained attack on mentalist views of language, including Chomsky's formal theories of universal grammar (which Skinner never explicitly addressed). After all, *Verbal Behavior* refuses the idea that

16 According to Rutherford (2006), Agnew's speech was originally delivered at the Farm Bureau of Chicago and reprinted later in *Psychology Today.*

the speaking subject is simply spilling grammatical rules, stored in the mind, out into the world. Skinner insisted that like any other behaviour, speech was subject to environmental conditioning, past and present, including, of course, *language socialization* (see Schiefflin 1986).

In his lengthy review of the book, Chomsky (1967, 43) nevertheless protested that while "the manner in which such factors operate and interact in language acquisition is completely unknown," and that "reinforcement" is one among many "important factors," one should conclude that "it is clear that what is necessary in such a case is research, not dogmatic and perfectly arbitrary claims, based on analogies to that small part of the experimental literature in which one happens to be interested."

While Skinner never replied to or directly engaged Chomsky, he was apparently speaking as much to him as to Rogers when he opened the second day of the Duluth debate by remarking:

> I have written a rather long and, I am told, very difficult book which attempts to account for verbal behavior on the part of the speaker, without invoking, one, the notion of meaning; two, the earlier notion of idea or proposition, or three, the more recent notion of information. These three terms all make a fundamental mistake in supposing that there is one kind of cognitive activity which is not itself verbal, which happens before verbal behavior, and that verbal behavior becomes simply the symptom of symbol. (*Dialogue* 1976)

Though there is much to say about this pregnant passage, here it is important to emphasize Skinner's efforts to dislodge the freedom of speech from the inside of speakers who are more-or-less constrained in pouring inner meaning, proposition, or information into words. This, Skinner maintained, overlooked where and how freedom might be cultivated. He insisted, instead, that freedom of speech is always a communal affair – a dynamic set of conditions that positively reinforces some verbal behaviour and discourages others, for better and for worse. As Skinner put it in Duluth: "In general, while those who deal with experience are likely to make a great deal of inner stimulation, those of us who deal with behavior are much more likely to talk about the common elements to the verbal community" (*Dialogue* 1976). Thus, while both his rivals repeatedly claimed, if in different terms, that Skinner's thesis downplayed the creativity of human self-expression, it is far more accurate to say that he concertedly attacked the chimera of the autonomous speaker.

Recall that Rogers was deeply committed to the notion of language-as-inner reference, a language ideology that enjoys widespread uptake in the United States as well as special prominence in therapeutic institutions (Carr 2006, 2011). As noted above, for Rogers to assert that his clients were liberated subjects, unmediated by his professional presence, he had to regard their speech

as free and pure expression. For the utopian Skinner, by contrast, the measure of democratic speech is never about the expression of the psychic interior of individual speakers; since freedom emerges in interaction, verbal behaviour, like all other behaviour, should socialize people into the shared norms of a just, democratic society, and do so transparently. These very different, if not directly antithetical, ideas about language not only organize the epistemologies, ethical stances, and democratic ideals of opposing American therapeutic approaches. They also provide some glimpses into the tensions and contradictions of broader American conceptions of the freedom of speech.

Conclusion: If Free Speech Walks Like a Duck, and Talks Like a Duck, It May *Not* Be a Duck

Over those two mid-century summer days in Duluth, Minnesota, much to his popular opponent's dismay, Skinner held firm that the relative freedom of speech is an affordance of systems that reinforce it to greater or lesser degrees, rather than a latent psychic quality of any one individual participant in it. On that stage, Skinner dared to insist that human behaviour, including speech behaviour, is driven by something other than the inner forces of individuals themselves. This audaciously implied, as Rogers rightly extrapolated, that human speech is unfree *if* freedom is narrowly conceived as an unfettered expression of a psychic interior.

Consider one last exchange, in which Rogers challenged Skinner to explain to a Freedom Rider as "a locus of unique forces which have predetermined him to move southward to site in certain illegal places," to which Skinner confidently responded: "There are many cultures which would never produce Freedom Riders at all" (*Dialogue* 1976). Clearly, given his experimental and utopian projects, this should not be read as an avowal of the state of American democracy, as Skinner then saw it. Rather, it is a reminder that the freedom of speech and other behaviours are the creatures of the ongoing experiment of American democracy. America's most prominent radical behaviourist called on fellow citizens to reflexively calibrate, rather than obscure or deny, the conditions that foster free speech, with freedom always measured by what is produced rather than simply expressed.

Indeed, by pointing to the paradoxes involved in directing ostensibly autonomous subjects and co-producing putatively free speech, Skinner and his duck story did more than critically highlight the political limitations of an asocial view of speech as autonomous self-expression. He also proposed an alternative approach to American political life that recognizes and values the social indices of verbal behaviour, and carefully crafts the conditions for transparent, reflexive, and responsive democratic exchange.