

The Myth of Social Conditioning

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In the vocabulary of conditioning, responses can be “triggered.” This essay on the idea of conditioning is a response, and I can explain precisely what “triggered” it. At a party on Christmas Day at Hampstead in London, I came across a young man wearing around his neck a studded dog’s collar. It is necessary to emphasize that I mean a collar appropriate to a dog, and not simply a clerical collar. But trading on that possible confusion, I immediately asked him whether this decoration was a witty way of proclaiming that he intended to become a clergyman. When he denied this, I suggested that possibly it proclaimed that he was a cynic, since the Greek word *kynikos* means a dog. Wrong again. Launched on the game, I remembered Alexander Pope’s couplet:

I am his majesty’s dog at Kew

Pray tell me, Sir, whose dog are you?

But he managed to exhaust all my ingenuity, and finally explained to me what he meant by the dog’s collar. It symbolized the human condition. It was not difficult to work out what he meant, for he was expressing one of the commonest views of what human beings really are.

We imagine (so the opinion runs) that we are superior to animals, yet we are actually nothing more than a set of organismic responses to stimuli like smiles, packaging, gender codes, the connotations of words, images, and symbols of all kinds. Hence it is appropriate that Pavlov, the famous Russian scientist who developed a conditioning theory of learning, should have made his most famous experiments on dogs. For all our illusions of superiority to the animal world, our life is nothing else but a form of higher salivation. Lurking in the background of this young man’s position was a revised version of the Socratic paradox: not “I am wise in that I know that I am ignorant,” but rather, “I am free, or at least rather superior to the ordinary person, in that I know that I am conditioned.”

One does not have to have adventured far into the realm of ideas to recognize in this position a version of one of the central beliefs of the western world in the twentieth century. It is, I think, a fundamentally religious belief, and it may be the only religion still

thriving in European civilization. It consists of believing that we are oppressed, that part of this oppression takes the form of alien ideas inside our own minds, and that the business of life is to liberate ourselves from this oppression.¹ Such a central core is to be found in two distinct versions, both of which are fakes for reasons I shall explain. One version is political, and discovers oppression in the nature of our social arrangements. The oppression may be based on class, sex, race, nation, or much else, and the liberation consists in revolution and the achievement of a true community in which—as it were—dog does not eat dog, and everybody helps with the washing up. This is usually a rather melodramatic version of the belief, and the believers discover themselves to be persecuted by patriarchy, the bourgeoisie, imperialists, WASPs, and much else. There is also a spiritual version, found in a thousand cults, most of them parodying some Eastern religion. Here we find as the fundamental belief the idea that man contains within himself a spark of illumination which could liberate him if only it could blaze forth. The problem of finding this true self is that the detritus of western rational thinking, the ambitions of the rat race, vanities, habits, aggression and the rest of the internal “static” have made us imperfect receivers of messages both from the illumination within and the vaster light beyond.

Neither of these types of doctrine is quite what it seems. The ideologies look political, but what they actually seek is to destroy politics altogether. Marx and Engels desire, as well as predict, that the state will wither away. And the cultic versions look like expressions of spirituality, but have altogether lost interest in the moral dimension of human life without which mystical exercises are mere expressions of technical virtuosity. Transcendental meditation, to take one example, is concerned with peace and happiness and power, not in any central way with goodness. And this move from the moral interest to the technical is why such cults flourish in a technological era like our own: they are, in fact, nothing else but exercises in a superstitious technology of the mind.

1. The belief I am discussing may be found at all levels of seriousness. As Michael Leapman writes when introducing an article on the National Association to Aid Fat Americans, “Few self-respecting Americans do not nowadays regard themselves as part of an oppressed and stigmatized group. Day after day, our sympathies are sought by indignant blacks, women, homosexuals, landlords, tenants, Irish, old people, young people... the list is endless.” *The Times* (London), July 3, 1981, p. 12.

The idea of social conditioning thus refers to the set of thoughts and attitudes which we must (according to these beliefs) conquer if we are to be truly free and rational. It is thus the central idea in a conception of human life as an adventure in self-improvement which can be measured by the extent to which we liberate ourselves from our conditioning. These salvationist doctrines are, in detail, enormously varied. My concern is not with the details but with the formal structure which underlies the whole enterprise. The point in each case is to create a higher version of humankind. Such a point is evident in the symbolism of the dog collar. For a dog is to the ordinary man as the ordinary man is to—what? A superman? A god? The answers range from P. D. Ouspensky's theme of the higher evolution of man to Marxist ideas about the new man who must be built to live in the socialist order.

Conditioning and Christianity

Since my concern is merely with the idea of social conditioning, it cannot include the wider ramifications of this idea. But there is one point which will help to put this matter into context. The religious core-idea that concerns me is clearly very different from the core-idea found in Christianity. In speaking of Christianity, I am concerned not with any particular version of that religion, but with those formal characteristics of Christianity which underlie the whole of western civilization. Christianity asserts that God created a perfect world which went wrong because of sin. This condition cannot change within history. The very concept of creation means that man is unbridgeably inferior to God, and hence that any idea of union with God could only be a matter of metaphor. All human transactions are distorted by sin, and the only appropriate attitude is that of humility and acceptance. It is obvious, of course, that this religion is entirely compatible with the most active transformation of the world. What it is not compatible with is any idea that man can, by his own efforts, transform his own character. Such a possibility involves an entirely different conception of both man and God, and can provoke in Christians only a few Pascalian mutterings to the effect that whoever tries to make men into angels will succeed only in turning them into devils. The idea of social conditioning, then, when it becomes entangled in these elevated intellectual regions, is a piece of scientific terminology which conceals the moral and theological issues raised by a proposal to transform the human race.

Our first task must be to explain the idea of conditioning, as it appears in three related fields: psychology, metaphysics, and politics.

Theories of Conditioning

Conditioning began its rise to fame with the experiments made early in the century by the Russian physiologist Anton Pavlov, who constructed a theory of learning based on the observation that some physiological responses may be produced not only by a natural or "unconditioned" stimulus, but also by associated stimuli. Dogs begin to salivate at the sight of food. This is the "unconditioned" response. They can be taught to associate other stimuli (the ringing of bells, the appearance of lights) with food; and so long as the association continues to be "reinforced," they will continue to respond. If the association begins to break down, then the conditioning will soon be "extinguished." The terms in quotation marks have become items in the terminology of learning theory, and later psychologists of a behaviorist disposition, such as J. B. Watson and B. F. Skinner, have followed Pavlov in widening the range of the theory far beyond dogs and simple reflexes so as to take in the most elaborate and complex of human responses. Skinner, for example, has developed a theory of superstition in terms of accidental reinforcement. This theory is taken to be confirmed by experiments with pigeons who, randomly rewarded, begin to behave as if the rewards are "caused" by the behavior in which they happened to be indulging when the reward occurred.

It has always been characteristic of science that it explains the complex in terms of the simple; and hence the idea that man is nothing but a very complex organism has been an irresistible implication of science ever since the days of La Mettrie's *L'homme machine*. We find the same idea clearly stated in Skinner's early work: "The hypothesis that man is not free is essential to the application of scientific method to the study of human behaviour."² This formulation is, however, misleading. The idea that human beings are law-governed organisms is not a hypothesis, but rather a presupposition without which no one could advance properly scientific hypotheses about human behavior. And behaviorism is that doctrine in psychology which argues that psychology can only ad-

2. B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behaviour* (New York: The Free Press, 1953), p. 447.

vance by abandoning all such ideas as the will, introspection, inner thoughts and other such "ghosts in the machine."³ The object of study must be man understood as a complex organism, and hence the model of plausibility in human behavior must be soldiers saluting and other such apparently in-built responses to stimuli. "When the Jewish child first learns to read," Skinner tells us, "he kisses a page upon which a drop of honey has been placed. The important thing is not that he will later salivate at the sight of a book, but that he will exhibit a predisposition 'in favor of' books."⁴ It is along these lines that a whole psychology of learning and self-control has been developed, in which stutterers are reinforced in speaking fluently by sympathetic responses, and sex maniacs discouraged from their dreadful practices by aversion therapy.

The great vogue of the idea of conditioning depends, then, upon the fact that it plays a central part in one area of psychology. In this area, its vogue is supported by such other concepts in biology and biochemistry as "imprinting," in which an accident of association in young organisms becomes a law of their behavior. When people talk in pseudo-scientific terms of "pressures," they are invoking the same paradigm of explanation. Similarly, explanation of human acts in terms of supposedly biological cycles like adolescence and the menopause draws upon the same material.

Second, the idea of conditioning plays an important part in philosophy, and I suspect that this usage is also relevant to its current vogue. The whole idea of a cause, which is arguably central to scientific explanation, may be understood in terms of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of an event. Perhaps more importantly, God is philosophically taken to be Unconditioned, thus distinguishing Him from all phenomena of which we have experience. Quite what such an idea would mean is something no one can give much account of, but there is no doubt that being unconditioned amounts to a dream of power, and it is indeed an illusion of human beings that they can attain an unconditioned state. The sage who finds "that content surpassing wealth" by means of meditation has put himself beyond the reach of the ordinary human conditionalities on which our happiness generally depends. By destroying conditioning, we may imagine that we have become free in a way that extends our power.

3. The reference is, of course, to the criticism of Cartesianism found in Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London, 1949).

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 57.

Third, there is an extended and weakened idea of conditioning which, drawing its plausibility from psychology, dominates our understanding of how people influence each other in fields ranging from education to propaganda. We are often tempted to distinguish the good and the bad in education by the use of a term like "indoctrination," which is a process by which ideas and attitudes are thought to be imposed upon other people. I have even seen the metaphor of "injection" used to convey the idea. "Programming" from computerspeak is another variation. Similarly, in politics, propaganda is the attempt by interested parties to make others think thoughts convenient to the interested parties. One of the dimensions of modern warfare is the battle of propaganda.

When this idea picks up the experimental reasonance of conditioning, it results in the idea of "brainwashing." This word became famous in the early 1950s as a name for the techniques by which North Korean communists induced some American prisoners of war to confess to "germ warfare." That men could be forced to lie by torture is hardly a new discovery, but such dramatic events as the absurd self-incriminating confessions of defendants at the Moscow purge trials in 1936-38 had made everyone aware of the totalitarian use of these techniques, which were, in the Korean case, deliberately patterned upon Pavlov's experiments in causing such stress to dogs that their personalities broke down altogether. Subsequently, William Sargent⁵ argued that the conditions for such breakdowns of personality with resultant heightened sensitivity to outside influences could be found in a range of common conditions, from rock concerts to the practices of certain religious cults.

Conditioning and Responsibility

Now the combined effect of this cluster of ideas is to erode the traditional model of moral responsibility for human acts. The arena in which the borderline between the scientific and the moral models of human action is most unstable is, of course, the court of law; and there seems to be no satisfactory intellectual account of how human acts could be divided between the contradictory attributes of conditioning and responsibility. On a deterministic view, everything we do is the outcome of nature, nurture, and condi-

5. William Sargent, *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* (London: Heinemann, 1957).

tions; on a moral view, everything except what can be shown to be the direct outcome of sleepwalking or hypnosis would be acts for which we are accountable. This is a question on which there is a huge literature, and I am certainly in no position to settle it now. All I can do is point to the fact that the idea of social conditioning has become a large component in the explanation of those irrational features of human existence which constitute "mitigating circumstances" in the judgment of an action.

Conditioning thus stands for an alien element within the self for whose effects we are not responsible. When, to take the most obvious kind of example, we excuse some youth from the slums for some violent or criminal act on the ground that he has been conditioned all his life to respond to his circumstances in that way, we make a plausible enough judgment. But in doing so, we threaten to leave no room at all for the idea of moral responsibility; and if we press this model of explanation further, we run the danger of making a responsible act altogether impossible. For any actual human being acts at a particular moment when some limited elements of his personality are uppermost, and it is always arguable that his action is the outcome of something other than his true self.

The idea of social conditioning has become one of the master ideas of the twentieth century, and it is not difficult to see why. We see our own rationality close up, and that of others from a distance. And since the attitudes and beliefs of many other people often seem to us to defy all rationality, it is convenient to be able to explain them in terms of some alien manipulation of the mind. Communists believe that the populations of western societies have been conditioned to a consumer ethic; and parents whose children have taken up with cults are prone to believe that the cults have brainwashed the children. Whatever the plausibility of this and many other versions of the conditioning argument, there is no doubting the rhetorical convenience of the idea. Our next task must be to sketch out the enormous range of applications it has developed in the last century or so.

It is well known that one man's dream is another man's nightmare; and the historical roots of the idea of conditioning go back to the Enlightenment hope that the nurture of human beings could become scientific. If so, then philosophers, if equipped with political and educational power, would be able to bring forth upon this planet an altogether superior class of human beings: rational, unprejudiced, free from superstition, and beyond any temptation to

the mad aggressions recorded by history. In writers like Condillac, the term "education" became a kind of respectable word to describe a process of personality-formation which we would today call conditioning, though conditioning, of course, of the supposedly benign sort revived in our days by B. F. Skinner. The theory on which this was based seemed at the time to be progressive and scientific. It was widely believed that science has "proved" that man was an organism behaving according to discoverable laws of behavior. This belief rested, in fact, upon confusing a conclusion with a presupposition: there can be no science of human behavior unless human beings are taken to be a field of phenomena governed by discoverable laws; and to the extent that this is true (which is limited) a science of human behavior has prospered. But no science can prove a presupposition; indeed, sciences do not, strictly speaking, "prove" anything at all.

Power and Control

The modern scientific theory of conditioning stems, as we have seen, from the work of Pavlov late in the last century; and it has been continued by behaviorists such as Watson and Skinner. The latter has revived the dream of a world saved from madness and folly by the conditioning of experts. But this scientific exploration of the idea has been less influential in making the idea current than political developments. From the rise of communism and fascism to power in the 1920s, it has been clear that the advance of political power depended upon the engineering of beliefs; hence propaganda has, in an age of democratic rhetoric, become a form of communications technology. Hitler was said to have mastered the technique of the Big Lie, which was so big that ordinary imaginations, not being able to comprehend that anyone could be so barefaced as to say anything so outrageous *unless* it were true, would collapse into a reluctant assent. Simple techniques such as repetition, and use of peer group domination, were thought to break down the resistance people had to the doctrines of governments; and this led psychologists in the West to investigate how far an innocent subject would continue to affirm some obvious truth (such as the comparative length of several lines on a piece of paper) against the unanimous derision of planted witnesses who asserted what was evidently, on inspection, false.⁶ Writing long

6. *Totalitarianism*, a collection of essays edited by Carl Friedrich (New York: The Universal Library, 1954), captures this mood very well. See especially "Ideo-

after in tranquillity, the most intelligent of Hitler's lieutenants distinguished earlier tyrannies from that of Hitler in the following terms:

Through technical devices like the radio and loud-speaker, eighty million people were deprived of independent thought. It was therefore possible to subject them to the will of one man. . . . Earlier dictators needed highly qualified assistants, even at the lower level, men who could think and act independently. The totalitarian system in the period of modern technical development can dispense with them. . . .⁷

Even more fascinating was the way in which power could be exercised over men who had given their lives to a cause so as to make them confess that they had actually betrayed that cause, the confession being manifest nonsense. It is out of phenomena of this kind that novels like *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler and *1984* by George Orwell came to dominate the contemporary imagination.⁸

logical compliance as a Social-Psychological Process" by Marie Jahoda and Stuart Cook, p. 203. The experiment I refer to is by Solomon E. Asch, "Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments" in *Readings in Social Psychology*, Ed. Swanson, Newcombe, and Hartley (New York: Henry Holt, 1952). It was observed that often the naive member of the group would look perplexed, fidget, mutter to his fellows. Still, as Hannah Arendt points out in discussion (*Totalitarianism*, p. 228) it is perfectly sensible to allow one's sensory judgments to be modified by those of others; hence this is not a case of *ideological* compliance.

7. Quoted in Maurice Latey, *Tyranny: A Study in the Abuse of Power* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 35.

8. How recent is the exploration of these possibilities is an interesting question. Not very new, I should guess. Consider an incident in the history of the Ch'in dynasty related by Ssu-ma Ch'ien:

In order to find out how far his authority carried, Chao Kao presented a deer to Erh Shih, the while calling it a horse. Erh Shih then inquired of those about him "But this is a deer!" His entourage all replied: "It is a horse." Believing he was suffering from some delusion Erh Shih became alarmed and summoned the Great Divine to prognosticate the matter. The Great Divine said: "When performing the suburban sacrifices in Spring and Autumn and making offerings in the ancestral temples, and to the spiritual beings, Your Majesty had not been pure in his fastings, and that is why he is come to this. . . ." This is quoted in Leonard Cottrell's *The Tiger of Ch'in* (London: Pan Books. 1962), p. 191. Cottrell goes on to remark that "This was the first of a series of 'brain-washing' operations designed to destroy what little self-confidence Erh Shih possessed."

The Korean War popularized a new version of the idea: brainwashing. And here the derivation from Pavlov was explicit. For the Korean captors of American soldiers were recognizably in a position of clear superiority to their prisoners, analogous to Pavlov's superiority to his dogs. The Koreans could (like the Nazi interrogators before them) determine almost all of the stimuli affecting their prisoners and could, by deprivation of food and sleep, make their victims the more pliable and suggestible. It is no wonder that many soldiers confessed to involvement in germ warfare. No wonder, also, that this scenario of interrogation has seized upon the modern imagination. It has, as we noted before, been generalized by William Sargent into a general theory of stress and susceptibility.

The next stage of the story may be called: The Hidden Persuaders meet the Military-Industrial Complex. A sociological popularizer called Vance Packard, earlier known as the inventor of the Organization Man, made a celebrated figure out of a motivational researcher called Dr. Dichter. Dr. Dichter's claim to fame was that he had discovered such hidden truths as that men subconsciously associate sports cars with mistresses and sedans with wives. Motor car manufacturers had thus accentuated sexual symbolism in the chassis of sports cars (the very word chassis, of course, had long had sexual connotations) and sold more of them than they had expected to. It was Dr. Dichter who made the discovery that many women had repressed exhibitionistic tendencies, and thus sold millions more bras on the basis of a promotion having the slogan "I dreamed I stopped the traffic in my Maidenform bra." Mr. Packard's ideas were taken up all over the world, particularly his concern with advertising in cinemas through subliminal stimuli which occurred too fast for the consumer to realize that he was receiving a message at all. Material like this gave a great fillip to the more melodramatic versions of the idea of social conditioning.

Into this stream of preoccupations there came to be fed social theories about the ideological conditioning necessary to sustain the capitalist system. A celebrated version of this doctrine was Herbert Marcuse's idea of repressive tolerance, a particularly brilliant extension of the idea of social conditioning, since it meant that even at the very moment when people were being explicitly encouraged to be critical and consider new ideas, they were actually being conditioned to passivity in the face of a fundamentally oppressive system. Marcuse's late-flowering celebrity coincided with the development of feminist uses of the idea.

Women, it was said, were conditioned because they had internalized the norms of the fundamentally oppressive relations of patriarchalism.⁹ And in more recent times, critics of modern society have concentrated upon "the media" as the dominant channel of information which "conditions" our view of the world.

I mention these signposts merely to prove that the idea of social conditioning, in a great variety of forms, has led to the central modern belief: That what we think and how we act are constantly being thrown off balance by alien influences, and that if only we could free ourselves from the prison of our conditioning, we would be able to enter upon a heritage of higher humanity merely glimpsed in all hitherto existing societies.

Is Conditioning Possible?

Having thus laid out the background to the idea, let me immediately say that social conditioning is impossible. Indeed, let me go further and say that any kind of conditioning is something that cannot be done to a human being at all. I am, of course, here taking "conditioning" in the scientific sense in which it was first used. To "condition" a human being would have to mean that some conditioner (i.e., one or more people) had caused the object of the experiment to behave in an entirely predictable way on the application of a stimulus; for that is the kind of thing that Pavlov did with dogs. And to see why it is impossible, one need merely note several features of the Pavlovian experiment. First, in order to get the response he wanted, Pavlov had to tie the dogs up and blinker them so as to isolate the stimuli they were receiving. Such complete control cannot usually be achieved in dealing with human beings, and even if it could, it would generally fail to deal with the flood of internal stimuli in the form of thoughts and sensations, memories and reflections, which constitute the inner life of a person. The exception here is evidently that of the interrogation of

9. Thus a relatively cool and academic version of the idea: "A few studies report on differences among women of different gender role orientations. If the argument holds that women's strategy or style of rationality is altered by internalizing the norms of an oppressive relationship, those who reject the traditional relationship should differ in their choice of behaviour from those who do not. This, after all, is part of the reason why movements of 'liberation' place such emphasis on changes of 'consciousness.' . . . there is probably no other relationship so few are willing to characterize as oppressive. Oppression of women and female dependence are so ubiquitous they appear natural to women and men alike." Virginia Sapiro, "Sex and Games: On Oppression and Rationality," *British Journal of Political Science* Vol. 9. Part 4 (October 1979), pp. 402-406.

prisoners, a point to which I shall return. Next, we may note that the conditioned responses were simple organismic reactions like salivation, and hence not much connected with thought and action. And finally we might note that the behavior tends toward "extinction" unless it is constantly reinforced. It is no doubt a grand dream of power that some people—rulers, advertisers, gurus—might have over others the sort of control we may admire in the ringmaster of a circus; but it is quite impossible.

The possible exception to this is, of course, the power that interrogators have over prisoners. They can give them drugs, interfere with their diet, and control the amount of sleep enjoyed by their victims. This is the nightmare of brainwashing, created in the Korean War and endlessly replayed in a thousand versions from spy fiction to the reports of practices among religious "cults." Hannah Arendt has argued that the hidden rationale of the concentration camps of the Nazis was that it ultimately reduced human beings to a bundle of reflexes; and since a bundle of reflexes is not a human being, the ultimate extinction of life took on a different significance. I presume that something like total control over a human being in this way is possible; and that a person might indeed be reduced to a mere organism. Proper evidence on the matter is, for understandable reasons, extremely sparse, and I am inclined to think that some element of reflection and awareness will be found under all conditions. Nevertheless, two points seem to be clear. First, that in order to condition someone to anything more than a simple reflex, one must first destroy him as a human being. And second, there is the empirical point that the conditioning will not long outlast the control. How many returned American prisoners of war believed the nonsense about germ warfare in which they had been drilled? That the effect upon them of such horrible experiences may well still give them nightmares is indeed likely. But the interrogators could not determine their beliefs and attitudes once the subjects had passed out of their control.

It will be obvious, I think, that no society could possibly have the same control over its citizens as that of the interrogator over his prisoner. There is no doubt that totalitarian regimes do dominate the lives of their subjects in highly influential ways, but none of these ways begins to approach the level of conditioning. The fundamental objection to the whole idea is, then, very simple: it is that *people think*. They often think in muddled and idiotic ways, but their thoughts soon begin to modify the effects of anyone who tries to determine what they think and do.

Conditioning or Influence?

Now there is, of course, an obvious objection to this knockdown argument against the possibility of conditioning. It is that most people don't use the word "conditioning" in this severely technical way. All that they mean by conditioning is a situation in which people are strongly influenced, thrown off balance, unable to make a rational response to what is happening to them. Is it not obviously the case that children are being constantly "conditioned" by the pressures of family life and of school, and consumers by the pressures of fashion and advertising? Was it not indeed the proud boast, attributed to him (perhaps mischievously) by Voltaire, of Ignatius Loyola: "Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man." Are not human beings visibly the outcome of the role models and peer groups by which they are surrounded? Hence (so it might be said) the objections I have presented to the idea of social conditioning are mere pedantry, and depend upon an absurdly technical definition of the word. It may be admitted that the vogue for the actual word "conditioning" itself may be one more example of that deplorable vulgarity by which people misapply technical words in order to sound impressive. "Conditioning" thus belongs with "parameter" and "schizophrenia" in the class of frequently misapplied technicalities. But on the facts of the case, so it might be thought, there is no controversy. We all agree that human beings are often easily influenced, that they think in a crooked fashion, and that they acquire habits and attitudes of a mechanical kind which are remarkably difficult to break. Where else can they have acquired these habits and attitudes than from society?

This objection suggests that we all agree on the facts, and that the whole problem merely arises from confusion about definitions. And facts are facts, it will be said, whatever words we choose to describe them. Yet our understanding of the world is very greatly affected by the concepts we acquire in the course of our experiences. We sometimes, for example, have the illusion of having understood more when we have merely learned the technical word for a process which we understood perfectly well in the first place. Such intellectual experiences are the cognitive equivalent of swagger, and the problem is that people who understand a theory sometimes jump to the conclusion that they now understand the world the theory purports to explain. It no doubt did Molière's M. Jourdain little harm to discover that he had been talking prose all his life; but many of those who mastered the Keynesian theory of

fine-tuning an economy do seem to have ended up thinking (as Keynes did not) that the production of wealth depended entirely upon adjusting interest rates and managing demand. It is indeed true that there is widespread agreement upon such facts as that human beings are often easily influenced, can be very gullible, are more affected by what they wish to happen than by objective considerations, and apply such rational capacities as they have patchily and unevenly. But what happens when the simple idea of influence is replaced, in making this point, by the pseudo-scientific idea of conditioning?

For one thing, conditioning is crisp and clear, whereas influence is amorphous. To be subject to an influence is an ordinary human experience, and the influenced thinks about the influencer, and can generally select, according to his wits, what he will and what he will not imitate or accept. He may not select wisely or well, but some selection is inevitable. In the ordinary course of life, many influences bear upon us and they often come into conflict. We are thus forced to choose, and the process of responding to influences is one we are all familiar with. The very word "conditioning" however impels us toward an understanding of human life much more portentous than a mere change of wording: it impels us toward an entire model of explanation. All conditioning relationships involve an (active) conditioner and a (passive) conditioned. Great teachers who strongly influence their pupils often insist, and rightly, that they have learned as much from their pupils as their pupils from them; this would be an absurd thing for a "conditioner" to say about a collection of people who have been "conditioned." Conditioning, further, is a pretty low-grade activity which can only result in the appearance of an "attitude" which must itself be judged by some higher intellectual activity. One might sensibly say: "I was influenced in understanding this phenomenon by" but one would not say "I was conditioned to understand this thing by" Finally, we commonly judge influences upon us as being good or bad, but "conditioning" is something which, when we discover it, must be thrown off and replaced by something superior: presumably rational or intelligent understanding.¹⁰

It is thus the case that everyone, as they grow up, must recognize that they have been influenced in a great variety of ways; and

10. The exception to this is B. F. Skinner's benign conditioning in *Walden Two*. But a form of social control can hardly masquerade as a Utopia.

will feel grateful to many of these influences for the benefits they have conferred. But to discover that one has been conditioned is not at all the same thing. Such a discovery is a realization that some of one's thoughts, attitudes and reactions have been irrationally acquired by way of social pressures and ought at least to be reconsidered and perhaps abandoned.

It follows that the mere substitution of the pseudo-technicality of "conditioning" for such ordinary words used to describe the same field as "influence" already carries us into a much more activist moral idiom. Indeed, the very currency of the word is enough to set up a virtual program of moral reform consisting in the self-eradication of those conditionings which continue to be discovered. To adopt a Marxist position becomes a matter of warring against the bourgeois ideological conditioning which the convert will undoubtedly discover in himself; while conversion to feminism often involves "consciousness raising" sessions in which the battle against the conditioning of the traditional feminine role may be conducted. The general result of adopting the doctrine of conditioning is to establish a civil war within the soul, in which the convert finds himself doing battle against aspects of his or her own character. For what else is "character" (if seen in these terms) except some form of conditioning? It is true, of course, that the currency of the word "conditioning" is widespread in circles where people do not hold systematic theories about the actual content of conditioning such as I have used as illustrations; and the word may thus in many cases be a harmless inexactitude about terminology. But it retains a potential to influence later behavior, a kind of latency similar to that of our bodies which contain, so biologists say, many germs which can become harmful under special circumstances.

In developing this argument, I have on occasion referred to considerations of a high metaphysical level; and they become appropriate here once more. The traditional view of our own character which our civilization has inherited from Christianity is that how we are is something we must accept. We must, of course, change our behavior so as to conform to our duties, but for the rest, it is our business to accept ourselves, improve our character, and recognize with humility our inevitable deficiencies. The concept of conditioning, by contrast, belongs to what one can best call a technologico-spiritual idiom, in which our character is understood to be a kind of mechanism subject to malfunctioning which will reveal itself in lack of power to achieve the objects of

our will (commonly in such fields as eradicating habits we deplore in ourselves) and to achieve such a ration of reliable happiness as we think appropriate. Merely to transpose our idea of human life into such terms as conditioning thus tends to promote a self-consciously activist idea of the moral life.

The subject being impossibly large for this format, I shall focus on what I shall call the rhetorical structure of the conditioning model of explanation. The model incorporates a Conditioner, a Conditioned, and a third abstract personage whom we shall have to call, clumsily, a Realizer. Let me consider each of these components in reverse order.

Self-Discovery by Numbers

The verb “to realize” belongs to a group of verbs (“refute” is another example) whose very meaning incorporates the idea that we know what the truth is. If it weren’t true, I wouldn’t say “I now realized that Smith had entered the room” but rather, “At that point I believed (or imagined, or thought) that Smith had entered the room.” To realize, as Gilbert Ryle says about this type of expression, is a “success” word.¹¹ To say this is to make a point about the logical grammar both of “realize” and the psychological process of conversion. When a person has been converted to a religion or to an ideology, or away from either, he or she believes, in the moment of conversion, that he or she has “realized” a truth previously concealed. Realizations are very interesting moments of the moral life. Most short stories and plays deal with moments when the characters realize something about themselves or others which they had not previously believed. And it is of course particularly the case with educated people, who think a great deal in an abstract way, that the moral life consists in a succession of such realizations.

Now any structure of belief, whether it be Christianity, or Sufism, or Anarchism or anything else, is a kind of engine for producing whole successions of realizations or revelations about one’s inner life. And to realize that one has always been conditioned in such and such a way is a very common content of modern realizations. Some people discover from their psychotherapist that they have been conditioned to be something rather mysteriously called “over-punctual” or “over-conscientious.” (This conditioning is the

11. *Concept of Mind*, p. 143.

supposed generator of feelings of anxiety.) Some Marxists seem to have discovered that they had been conditioned (for example) to regard the unemployed as lazy, but they now realize that such people are the victims of a system. Feminists have been known to make the discovery that they had been conditioned, as women, to be agreeable to everybody, and a common "solution" has been a training in aggression, known as "assertiveness training." (Whole books are written about it.) Consumers are often thought to have been conditioned by advertisers to buy a new machine rather than repair a broken one. And so on.

It needs hardly to be said, of course, that these realizations are no more likely to be true (or indeed false) than any other idea that people get into their heads. The logical grammar of the verb "to realize" merely means that truth is entailed in the meaning of the word; not at all that the content of the realization must be true. But when we realize something, we are being active and we usually imagine we have discovered some previous blind or perhaps victimized part of ourselves. "God! What a fool I've been," the hero of Hollywood movies used to cry as he headed back to claim the heroine; but that was no guarantee that he wasn't also being just as big a fool at that moment. (Given some of those heroines, he almost certainly was.) When the content of the realization is that some habit or attitude of mind was in fact a matter of conditioning, then the person has, as it were, divided himself into an active and a passive part. The active part is the Realizer, the passive part is the Conditioned, and the person construes himself in that respect as having been victimized. As "conditioned to excessive punctuality" I was a mere thing, a mechanism, suffering experiences over which I had no control; in the moment of my realization, I take on personhood—at the price, however, of reifying some now rejected part of my personality as it has hitherto operated. Further, the conditioning has usually been an alien influence: parental mistakes in toilet training may perhaps have conditioned me in this way, but I am, in realizing, about to take the first steps in liberating myself. What I am liberated *from* must always be something construed as alien to me, even though it may in fact be my own natural propensities.

The crucial point is that, in construing some facet of my behavior as alien, I cut myself off from self-understanding. For it is obvious that there can be no habit of behavior which I develop which does not have *some* contact with my natural inclinations. In the traditional idea of the moral life as a process of continuing devel-

opment, I discover features of my own character never properly understood before. In the conditioning model, I merely discover that I have been the victim of alien influences. Self-discovery is thus impeded by the assumption that the rejected component of the self had no connection with the real me. And this feature of the concept of conditioning corresponds to a further fact about the model of conditioning: that what I am being liberated *into* is something abstract and fixed. The women who try to slough off their inherited femininity like an old snakeskin are drawn toward an abstract ideal of liberated womanhood entirely unconnected with their individual character. By contrast, the traditional theory of moral development, which depends upon realizations less dramatic and pretentious than the discovery that we have been conditioned, is a combined process of self-discovery and self-understanding in which the direction of movement must be given by the individual himself. Moral development must, indeed, be moral; but this means no more than that the process accords with abstract criteria of right and wrong. The concrete development depends upon the individual himself: urban or pastoral, philanthropic or intellectual, all depends upon the specific personality of the subject. This is why modern western society has produced, over the last four or five centuries, an abundance of individual personalities, a thriving interplay of nature and nurture, as in a *jardin anglais*, or in that most individualistic and characteristic art form of our civilization, the novel.

By contrast, the ideological and occult versions of the idea of conditioning are concerned with a de-individualized personhood of a much grander kind: socialist man (in whom the conditioned egoisms of capitalism will have been extinguished), liberated women who may or may not be masculine but will certainly be androgyne, and other more highly evolved forms of humanity,¹² none of them recognized as an individual, with both the weaknesses and the distinctiveness implied by that word. But what is, on this model, the "conditioned" is from another point of view simply the character I have developed.

Personality and Reason

In general, the more automatic a response, the more plausibly it may be classified as conditioned. By such a test, most of our be-

12. For a compact version of this idea, the reader could do much worse than consult P. D. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951).

havior has been infected: everything, from our manners, our dietary preferences, the occasions when we smile or give way to expressions of discontent, and so on. In the much earlier versions of the idea of conditioning, which were closely linked to rationalism, the old-fashioned soldier on the drill ground was the very epitome of a conditioned man. He saluted his officers without a thought, and had been trained in such a way that obedience to a command was so deeply entrenched in his muscles as to require no intervention of thought. He was, as far as is possible to a human creature, untroubled by the noise of cannon or the fear of death. A soldier of this kind could certainly not turn himself over night into an intellectual or a peasant; but then, the infinite flexibility to which the idea of rationality points us is not in fact attainable by anyone. For it is part of a human being to be a structure of learned responses around which rationality plays in often indeterminate ways. And this point is so fundamental that there is much disagreement about what should replace it. For the rationalist, an individual's character is construed as habit, routine, and prejudice and must be sloughed off in favor of a rational response (which would not differ from man to man) to each new situation: a conception of life so fatiguing in prospect that it is a relief to recognize how impossible it is. More recently, we have seen those who wish to slough off their bourgeois conditioning in order to attain the authenticity of the proletariat. As we have suggested, such an aspiration leaves no room for individuality: that is, perhaps, its point. Encounter groups of a thousand kinds seek a way through the maze of a lifelong conditioning to the treasure house of authenticity by way of unbridled rip-roaring self-expression. Occult groups may be found purging the mind of thought, or developing consciousness so that it rises above the supposedly mechanical aspects of our personality. (They are in fact much less mechanical than they look to a superficial observer.) But in all cases it will be found that much if not all of individual character has been conceptually transposed into "the conditioned." Personality thus turns into a problem to be worked on by the Realizer.

It needs to be emphasized that what I am dealing with is a structure of thought so abstract that it can comprehend intellectual currents which in many ways are directly opposed to one another. I have observed that early versions of the conditioning model often look like reason gone mad. They would turn every man into a Socrates, subjecting to a continuous play of discursive reasoning every habit or judgment we inherited from five minutes

ago. But there are other currents of thought, both political and pseudo-spiritual, in which the capacity for discursive reasoning is precisely the problem: something to which we have become conditioned by the unbalanced nature of our civilization. Socrates and Sherlock Holmes cease to be models and turn into twisted sacrifices on the altar of abstract thought: victims of bourgeois objectivity, or the unbalanced development of the brain hemispheres.¹³ For in this world of thought, there are only two gears: the conditioned and the liberated. But these concepts are merely vessels which may be filled with anything that human ingenuity and current desperation may suggest.

Who Conditions?

What then of the Conditioner? It is in considering this component of the model that we can see most clearly that the idea of conditioning (outside its stricter uses in academic psychology) is but superficially scientific. For the conditioner is always an evil force in human life. It may be the capitalist system, the media, advertisers, the family construed as a vehicle of bad social forces, patriarchy, technocratic rationality or much else. It may be, as sometimes in a scientific utopian like Skinner, merely the accidental association which leads to a superstitious conviction; but it is, even in this case, clearly irrational. It is not, of course, entirely impossible for someone to remark: "I'm glad I was conditioned to be tidy," but it is certainly unusual, for conditioning almost always functions as a discovered evil which needs to be overcome. But how is it that an evil Conditioner can so cripple the higher qualities of humans with a destiny of higher development? The answer is always that the Conditioner strikes at human weakness. Capitalism can condition workers to false consciousness because it oppresses them and keeps them weak; advertisers can condition women to the use of vaginal deodorants because it strikes at their psychological insecurities. Cults are always supposed to acquire their domination over their members because (like the Evil One) they always

13. Robert E. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1972). A different version of the same idea is to be found in Carlos Castaneda's account of yaqui shamanism in a series of books such as the aptly named *Tales of Power* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975). I have discussed this particular version in an essay called "The Guru" in *The Don Juan Papers*, Ed. Richard de Mille (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1980). The essay was originally published in *Encounter* (August 1976).

wait for moments of weakness like grief, or loneliness. In a brief discussion, it is impossible to open up this fascinating area of rhetoric fully, but there is one central point to be made. It is that the whole argument rests upon the dogmatic assumption that there is one right way of looking at the world. In Marxist argument, it must be assumed that only convictions critical of capitalism are a true perception of the world as it really is, and that everything else must be taken to be a distortion of thought. In the advertising example, it must be taken for granted that only a psychologically deranged woman could have been brought to believe that vaginal deodorants were necessary or desirable. Similarly, the argument about cults must take it for granted that no healthy minded and rational person could possibly believe in, say, the doctrines of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. No doubt there is something to be said on all these questions. I merely point out that the pseudo-technical concept of conditioning, as used in these and all other cases, systematically obscures the fact that its validity depends upon highly contestable arguments which it tries to render peripheral.

The move from Pavlov's scientific idea of conditioning to the pseudo-scientific idea that concerns me is a move from a concrete to an abstract conditioner. Pavlov and his associates, like the brainwashers of Korea, were highly specific individuals with clear and understandable purposes in mind. Once we float the idea out into the mists of vagueness where the Conditioner becomes something abstract—society, the system, the family and so on—then any explanatory magic it might have had in its stricter sense disappears altogether. And this is the reason why, even if it were possible to condition human beings, *social* conditioning would still be a foolish expression. We can make this point in another way. If we were socially conditioned, we would all be the same. But in fact, we are not. That, indeed, is precisely the thing which seems to weigh heavily upon the thoughts of those attracted to the conditioning model of explanation: Being unable to conceive how other people can think differently from the way they think, they are driven to construct a pseudo-scientific melodrama to explain this astonishing fact. The curious paradox is that all of those who say that our civilization is conditioned, and thus uniform and limited, invariably propose forms of liberation in which the great efflorescence of individual differences which have hitherto characterized the western world would disappear forever in the uniformities of a higher life.

The idea of conditioning thus stands for an alternative understanding of the moral life. The developing but forever imperfect moral character adumbrated in the traditional thought of our civilization has been dissolved by the conditioning model into a kind of civil war of the soul: higher realizations struggle with lower conditioning, and beckon us onward to a heaven on earth: a good society or an elite company of higher souls, wherein the irrationalities of conditioning have been forever extinguished.

Myths and Spells

The word "myth" is often misused as no more than a contemptuous way of saying that a belief is false. I hope that what I have so far said will make it clear that I regard the idea of social conditioning as being, indeed, wrong, but also as an idea of such resonance that it may suitably be described as a myth. I have argued that, on logical grounds, social conditioning is an impossibility. How has this impossibility come to be so influential?

One reason is that in a technological age, we can hardly help construing *everything* as if it were no more than material for transformation; and one of the parts of our environment we are most keen on transforming is other human beings. The idea of conditioning fits in with this desire. Conditioning is, further, entirely consonant with our instinctive belief that, except on the superficial matters we enjoy disputing with our friends, there is only one sensible way of viewing the world: namely, our own. If so, how are we to explain the foolish beliefs of other people? Social conditioning gives us an answer. I am tempted to say that it gives us a "comfortable" answer, but this use of the word "comfortable" is, of course, no more than a sophistic jibe.

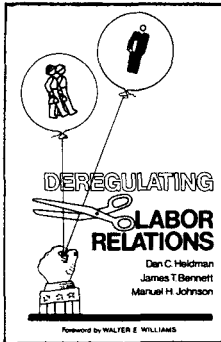
But there can be no doubt about the rhetorical convenience of the idea of conditioning. The world is full of peddlers of messages, and they all meet resistance. By using the conditioning model, they can avoid recognizing that other people have reasoned things out and come to a different conclusion. They are able to say: "Your resistance to my message is because you have been conditioned." Intellectually, this has about the same explanatory force as saying: "You are under the spell of an evil magician." Indeed, it amounts to about the same thing. And this is hardly surprising, for we are dealing with a pretty unsophisticated part of the rhetorical jungle.

There is perhaps one further point to be made about the place of the idea of conditioning in rhetorical strategies, and it is a polit-

ical one. It concerns the difficulty of promoting Marxist messages in the conditions of the late twentieth century. The problem arises from the fact that all communist governments have a grisly history of killing and lying. Since about 1956, it has no longer been possible even to pretend that Russia and China have not been riddled with these things. The problem is, then, how can Marxist ideas be propagated when they have a practical history of such unmitigated disaster? The answer consists in arguing that in reality, our situation in the West is no different. The rhetorical elaboration of this strategy is a complicated subject, but fundamentally it consists in setting up a structure of notional parallels such that any criticism of a communist regime can be blocked by reference to some equally dire practice in the West. The idea that we are all the victims of ideological conditioning corresponds, within this strategy, to the totalitarian dominance over education, news, and art in communist countries. We are, on this view, no less oppressed and dominated than the peasant in Omsk largely dependent (except perhaps for bootlegged radio) upon the Party for his attitudes to the world. In terms of conditioning the diagnosed evils of capitalist society replicate exactly the admitted evils of Communist states.

Persuaded thus, my friend at the party symbolized his condition by wearing a dog's collar. He was only a pantomime dog dressed in an ill-considered theory. Still, both people and dogs sometimes grow into the masks — and the collars — they wear. And that would be unfortunate. It isn't a dog's life. Really it isn't.

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Over There

The Riotous British

For most Americans, the spectacle of major British cities plunged into vicious rioting came as a profound shock. Was not mainland Britain a country which was, for all its faults, its reputation for bad labor relations and its apparent indifference to efficiency, above all a model of peace and stability? It was as if a maiden aunt, amiable if maddening, had suddenly taken to brawling in the street. How? Why?

The first surprise which may have struck the inquirer directing his interrogatories across the Atlantic has been the suspicious tendency on the part of politicians, commentators, journalists, and *bien pensants* generally to assure him (and each other) what the riots were not. They were not, the chorus has run, race riots. They are not, really, honestly, believe us. Those who, on the basis of what they saw on TV had the temerity to suggest otherwise have been met with the sort of assurance best summed up by the remark of the police chief in Liverpool, the worst hit of all the cities. What they had seen, he said, was not a race riot but just a lot of young blacks attacking the police. Oh! Ah. . . .

From this the inquirer will conclude that someone is surely protesting too much. Why the frantic attempts to insist that these were not race riots in some sense and that the apparent racial element was misleading? The explanation is simple. Over the last twenty-five years or so, Britain has accepted, largely through the muddle of laws designed for the imperial era, a huge colored immigration such that whole areas of the larger inner cities have been transformed into virtually alien territory. For the last fifteen years or so, a few lone voices in politics have been predicting dire consequences (producing a wave of agreement from ordinary voters and howls of execration from the political establishment).

Thus the possibility that the predicted moment had arrived was a hideous thought which had to be fought off by all those who had invested huge amounts of political, moral, and emotional capital in the notion that the transformation into a multi-racial society would be peaceful and safe. The possibility that the Great and the Good had been wrong on a scale unparalleled since appeasement