Humanism and the Science of Behavior

An issue seems to be mounting in our time between humanists and scientists working on the experimental analysis of behavior. The awesome practical control we have gained over our physical and biological environments is presently being joined by a growing control over animal and human behavior, and this development is coming increasingly to the attention of workers in the other sciences and in the humanities. The issue is between two concepts of man, that of a free individual as against that of a controlled organism. Remarkable contemporary advances in the discovery of behavioral principles and in their application to human activities have spurred and given new force to the debate. To be sure, this is not an entirely new problem in the history of philosophy, and there may be little one can say on the matter that is wholly original. Yet it seems worthwhile to recall some centrally relevant things before the split deepens any further. Everyone who has thought about the issue seems willing to grant that in every man's behavior there is some measure of "freedom" and some measure of "control," defined somehow. In some sense, both are present. The real problem is to clarify that sense.

For any human culture to function and survive in the world, it must be able to operate on some levels of practical knowledge of that world and the creatures in it. It must exercise some control over its environment, animate and inanimate. In addition, it makes presumptions about those things of which it does not as yet have valid information. Thus, every culture has a folklore about behavior, animal and human, and ours is no exception. Besides what it knows factually about behavior, a culture entertains storied notions that are its common currency of belief. Every man growing up in his society is routinely shaped to accept such mythic accounts of himself and his fellows. The full extent of that shaping has only recently come to recognition: society determines not only what the individual will believe, but also what he perceives, what he sees and hears and feels. The power of social control over the individual is so deep-going that it is as yet only glimpsed by behavioral science. It will be acknowledged even more tardily and reluctantly by thinkers outside that science.

Western culture carries as one of its dominant themes a humanistic tradition grounded in ancient Greek and Hebrew thought, and succored from medieval religiosity by the Renaissance. Classical
humanism regarded itself, and strove to be, a secular orientation emphasizing man and his place in the world. It took a stance against the other-worldliness which many religions contain in some degree and which they sometimes allow orthogenetically to grow rampant, overshadowing all else in them. Yet humanism never became, and probably had no genuine wish to be, thoroughly materialistic. Now it is reasserting itself in reaction to the modern scientific thrust which is subserving our own culture's equally ancient materialistic note.

At bottom, humanism regards man as a thinking and feeling organism; as a discoverer or inventor of morality; as having a philosophical mind; as being creative in the arts and sciences; as possessing a will and a choice of action; as being "free." Humanism will admit that man has his animal elements, but believes that he is more than that. He is an animal plus, and that plus is not material and not open to dissection and analysis as worldly science would have it. Because of that plus, man is not a machine and cannot be altogether controlled like a machine. This is, of course, the same doctrine that the Hebrew-Christian religions uphold. Whatever classical humanism might have thought of the divine mysteries in the religions it opposed, it retained the mystery in man. Man is not merely aner, but also anthropos; not merely adam, but also enosh. He is a duality, and that dualism must be guarded against the onslaught of a materialistic science which threatens to reduce him to a pure machine under total control. Freedom is at stake. Humanism enters the lists with three weapons: a philosophical view of man and his nature; an attitude about the limitations of scientific knowledge, and the never-to-be-ended ignorance about man and his ways; an appeal, even if ad hominem, to the scientist to recognize that he is himself not a machine, and that he is free even in his choice of whether to pursue science or not. Success with any one of these weapons means to humanism that freedom is secured and control is defeated.

Because science is an enterprise dealing with the material world, its discoveries and theories are always couched in deterministic form. While it will acknowledge present ignorance, it has no room for mystery. Moreover, scientists feel themselves standing on a rising pinnacle of knowledge—they see the fence of ignorance receding ever farther, and will concede no limit to the horizon to which their vision might extend. They see no empirical problem as being in principle beyond the reach of their methods, and none is excluded from their goals. The behavior of organisms is such an empirical problem to them. It is not exempt from scientific research, nor from as much control as instant and future knowledge can command. The visible behavior of organisms can have real variables brought to bear upon it, with visible results. There is no reason for the study of it