In Chapter 1 I have claimed that B. F. Skinner's radical behaviorism is an especially appropriate psychology to use in explicating Shakespeare's dramatic characters as imagined persons. This chapter presents a fresh account of radical behaviorism that brings out the important functions of cognitions and emotions. Skinner's view of the human being as subject will become clear as I explain his ideas about the way the conditions of life control behavior and the way thoughts, feelings, and actions affect each other.¹ (My examples are drawn from middle-class Western culture, but the psychological principles are held to be universals.) Skinner's ideas will be faithfully explained, but whereas he emphasizes that we are not "initiating agents" as causes of our behavior, I want to clarify the precise sense in which he means this. Some of his statements are easy to read as meaning we are compelled to behave in certain ways by the environment. Thus it is not generally understood that Skinner explains how knowledge of the causes of human behavior can be used to learn modes of self-control and of agency for social change. As subjected subjects we can have a kind of agency that is "beyond freedom," in Skinner's phrase, but nevertheless powerful.

Let us begin with a central issue concerning the subject and the causes of human behavior. Skinner says our thoughts and feelings do not cause our behavior because they are themselves caused by the causes of our behavior: thoughts and feelings are dependent variables. For example, the weather is an independent variable, and a practical intention to carry an umbrella depends on the weather. Yet in advancing this view Skinner acknowledges and, better, explains the role of intentions in the control of behavior, and he also explains how an emotional state influences thought and action. I will elaborate on this in what follows, first taking up intentions and their relation to independent variables in producing behavior.

The independent variables, which cause behavior, are in the environment, in a person's genetic endowment as a human being and as an individual, and in a person's "learning history" — acquired tendencies to behave in certain ways because of past experience. For example, if we buy a lawnmower it is because our old one is worn out, because we
have learned to use a lawnmower, because there is grass to mow, and because we have experienced rewards of some sort for mowing the lawn. These and factors such as the availability of money are independent variables, and the intention to buy a lawnmower is a dependent variable: the lack of a usable lawnmower causes the intention to buy one and the act of buying it in a person whose learning history includes the use of a lawnmower.

Skinner thus sees the intention and the act of buying to be parts of the same complex action. That is, he denies mind-body dualism and says that to formulate an intention is to do something. Deciding, intending, and planning to buy are the first steps on the way to the store, activities as much caused by the independent variables as the buying itself is. But the deciding and planning, as intentions, do specify the further steps to be taken – they guide and control the action. Thus we direct our behavior, and this is a common sense notion of causality. We would think it odd, however, if we found ourselves buying a lawnmower without causes external to ourselves – and in this we would acknowledge the behaviorist concept of causality.

That a thought does not directly cause an act should be obvious on close inspection: I can intend my arm to rise and it will not rise unless I also actually move it: the things I do to move my arm are separate from what I do when I formulate an intention to move my arm. My intention to do something I cannot do will not enable me to do it. I can intend to mail a letter and not do it because habit carries me along a street with no mailbox. If I notice the letter in my hand, I may change my course toward a street with a mailbox: an intention must be kept in conscious thinking in order to guide action effectively. If I think of something I should do before I mail the letter, my intention changes: changed conditions cause changes in intentions. More importantly, sometimes we have "good intentions" we do not act on, and sometimes strong intentions to stop overeating or smoking yield to temptation or habit. Furthermore, a sincerely stated intention may be a rationalization and not the true cause of our conduct.

There is another notion of intentions as causes to consider, the concept of intention as characteristic commitment, as implicit in an action and not necessarily articulated but inferable when we think about our motives. Analysis of this idea leads directly to Skinner's view. For example, people who have a characteristic commitment to the values of a social class and act for those values do not think they are caused to act by their intention to do so but that they should act because of conditions or events. The causality here has two sets of independent variables: (1) the facts of the situation and (2) the learning history of these people, the way their past has shaped their interpretation of the situation, their commitment to the values of their class, and their tendencies to act as they do. Thus character,