

QUOTATION

ROBERT PENN WARREN AND B. F. SKINNER ON DETERMINISM AND BEHAVIOR

In Robert Penn Warren's novel *All The King's Men* (1946), the protagonist Jack Burden heads to the west coast after learning that his life-long love, Ann Stanton, has become the mistress of his friend Willie Stark. After a short time alone in a hotel room in Long Beach, Jack returns having discovered "the dream."

That dream was the dream that all of life is but the dark heave of blood and the twitch of the nerve. ... At first, it is always a nightmare and horrible, but in the end it may be, in a special way, rather bracing and tonic. At least it was for me for a certain time. It was bracing because after the dream I felt that, in a way, Anne Stanton did not exist. The words *Ann Stanton* were simply a name for a peculiarly complicated piece of mechanism, which should mean nothing whatsoever to Jack Burden, who himself was simply another rather complicated piece of mechanism. At that time, when I discovered that view of things—really discovered, in my own way and not from any book—I felt I had discovered the secret source of all strength and all endurance. That dream solves all problems.

The implications for Burden were that "nothing was your fault or anybody's fault, for things are always as they are." As a result, "you are never guilty of a crime which you did not commit. So there is innocence and a new start in the West after all."

On Burden's return from the West he encounters a hitch hiker suffering from a chronic tic disorder. With the facial tic serving as a metaphor for determined behavior, Burden addresses the question of how "knowledge" of behavior's determinants (in Burden's words: "the truth") influences the behavior of those with the knowledge.

I did not ask him if he had learned the truth in California. His face had learned it anyway, and wore the final wisdom under the left eye. The face knew that the twitch was the live thing. Was all. But, having left that otherwise unremarkable man, it occurred to me, as I reflected upon the thing which made him remarkable, that if the twitch was all, what was it that could know that the twitch was all? Did the leg of the dead frog in the laboratory know that the twitch was all when you put the electric current through it? Did the man's face know about the twitch, and how it was all? And if I was all twitch, how did the twitch which was me know that the twitch was all? Ah, I decided, that is the mystery. That is the secret knowledge. That is what you have to go to California to have a mystic vision to find out. That the twitch can know that the twitch is all. Then, having found that out, in the mystic vision, you feel clean and free. You are at one with the Great Twitch.

In *About Behaviorism* (1974), B. F. Skinner addresses how the discussion of self control may appear contrary to a behavioristic formulation suggesting some lack of determination. Or does the behaviorist's use of ordinary language, or for that matter any of his own behavior, violate his behavioristic account? Had Skinner not decided to write that book? Skinner states the issue in another form:

If human behavior is as fully determined as the behaviorist says it is, why does he bother to write a book? Does he believe that anything matters? To answer that question we should have to go into the history of the behaviorist. Nothing he says about human behavior seriously changes the effect of that history. His research has not altered his concern for his fellow men or his belief in the relevance of a science or technology of behavior. Similar questions might as well be asked of the author of a book on respiration: "If that is respiration, why do you go on breathing?"

Ultimately, Burden (Warren) does not fully appreciate the issues of determinism to the degree that Skinner does, though Burden does analyze his own history. And in fact an appreciation of his own personal history is Burden's salvation. He abandons the Great Twitch for a pious view of good and evil that parallels that of his one-time friend, Willie Stark, who on his death bed says to Burden, "It might have been all different, Jack. You got to believe that."

REFERENCES

- Skinner, B. F. (1974). *About behaviorism*. New York: Knopf.
- Warren, R. P. (1946). *All the king's men*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.