

*POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT ACCORDING TO MAIMONIDES,
THE 12TH CENTURY JEWISH PHILOSOPHER*

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Maimonides, arguably the most influential Jewish scholar ever, offers an analogy remarkably similar in “spirit” to positive reinforcement approaches to education. While discussing a matter of faith in his commentary on a tractate of the Talmud (see Touger, 1994), Maimonides walks the potential teacher through the essential steps of effective education. He clearly delineates the contingencies for learning using powerful reinforcers, progressing from edible to tangible and finally to social stimuli as they change in value in accord with the student’s developing “desires.” He starts by advising the teacher of a young child brought for his Bible studies “to encourage the child by offering something he will appreciate according to his childish conception of things. And so, the educator will tell him: Study and I will give you nuts, figs, or a piece of sugar” (p. 157). When the child grows older “he will view lightly the things that he previously thought were important, and instead will consider other things to be valuable. Therefore, to encourage him to study, he will be promised the things that he then thinks are valuable. For example, his teacher will tell him: Study, and I will buy you attractive shoes or clothes that look like this” (p. 157). When this type of tangible reinforcer loses its effectiveness, “his teacher will tell him: Study this passage or this chapter and I will give

you a dinar or two dinarim” (p. 158). And finally, as the student matures and “reaches a deeper level of understanding, and knows to appreciate even this matter [money] as having little importance, he will be encouraged by something that is of even greater eminence. He will be told: Study so that you will become a Rabbi or a judge, and others will honor you. They will stand before you, endeavor to uphold your words and enhance your reputation, both in your lifetime and afterwards, like so and so, and so and so” (p. 158). Ultimately, although unachievable by most (therefore he reluctantly recommends the above) “the purpose of study should be knowledge, and the ultimate purpose of truth should be to know that it is true” (p. 158).

Maimonides’ advice appears to predate Skinner’s view that it “is the teacher’s function to contrive conditions under which students learn” (1978, p. 145). Skinner notes here as well:

It is not enough to give the student advice—to explain that he will have a future, and that to enjoy himself and be more successful in it he must acquire certain skills and knowledge now. Mere advice is ineffective because it is not supported by current rewards. The positive consequences that generate a useful behavioral repertoire need not be any more explicitly relevant to the future than were the punitive consequences of the past. The student needs current reasons, positive or negative. (p. 145)

Maimonides (at least in the passages cited here) eschews any mention of negative consequences in explicit favor of positive stimuli delivered contingent on study. Historically, according to Skinner, aversive “reasons” were

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prevalent: "The Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans all whipped their students. Medieval sculpture showed the carpenter with his hammer and schoolmaster with the tool of his trade too, and it was the cane or rod" (1978, p. 143). The move towards "positive consequences" in what's known as "progressive education" is a relatively recent development (Skinner, 1968, p. 15).

According to Skinner, attempts to replace contrived consequences with positively reinforcing natural stimuli were carried out by educators starting with Rousseau through at least John Dewey, but these failed because "there are no natural consequences that can be efficiently used to shape the early stages of reading and writing. ... Special contingencies must be contrived" (1987, p. 176).

Maimonides recommends the use of positive, effective, and contrived consequences to foster learning in children. Although considered standard practice today by many, it was very progressive for his era.

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