

Joseph Wood Krutch (1893-1910) American literary and social critic, wrote the following essay (here excerpted) in 1965.

Once when James Boswell and Dr. Johnson were discussing Boswell's greatest weakness--drink--Boswell said it was strange that a man should make a beast of himself. The doctor replied that it was not strange because "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man." A century later the great biologist Thomas Henry Huxley made this extraordinary statement: "If some great power would agree to make me always think what is true and do what is right, on condition of being turned into a sort of clock and wound up every morning before I got out of bed, I would instantly accept the offer." Huxley seemed to be saying that he would be willing to make a machine of himself to get rid of that same pain. Are there any today who would make the same choice and are there others, more dangerous perhaps, who--without quite facing the implication of their proposals--are moving in the same direction?

Let us take an example of the extreme position, presented by the eminent Professor Skinner. A few years ago I took part in a panel discussion with him in which "survival," as the ultimate value, was discussed. Here is a short excerpt from a transcript of the discussion:

Mr. Krutch: Supposing you should come to the conclusion, as the result of your investigations, that the healthiest and most enduring society was composed of creatures whose responses had become so automatically perfect that consciousness was no longer necessary and would disappear, would you consider this eternally surviving group of unconsciously functioning organisms a result you would envisage with equanimity and pleasure?

Mr. Skinner: Yes, I would envisage that result with pleasure; but what I would not is the condition in which that would be the case. [I include the second clause of his reply for the sake of fairness though I do not think I understand what it means.]

In Professor Skinner's striking Utopia, which he published under the title *Walden II*, the citizens of his ideal commonwealth have not ceased to be conscious but they have been so benignly conditioned to automatically right attitudes and responses, that consciousness seems to perform no function other than, perhaps, to give them the satisfaction of feeling that they are still in some sense living creatures rather than machines. This situation has been created by a technician who has completely mastered the behavioral sciences and, as the *raisonneur* of *Walden II* points out, the lesson is simply this: What is commonly called education is too slow a process and too uncertain in its results. Instead of trying to teach people to reason and make conscious choices, we must bypass all such processes and concentrate upon direct conditioning. In his Utopia people behave in a fashion we are accustomed to call reasonable, not because they reason but because they do not; because their automatic responses are the right ones--as they also are in a termite colony.

Now, Professor Skinner is an extremist and a very logical one. I doubt that very many of those who tell us that the hope of mankind lies in the development of “the behavioral sciences” would actually face, as he does, the logical conclusion to be drawn from that premise. But just insofar as we do place our faith in the behavioral sciences rather than in education, reason, and

B. F. Skinner (1904-1990), American behavioral psychologist. Like other behaviorists, Skinner was not concerned with mental operations that cannot be observed directly, but was concerned instead with patterns of response to rewards and other external stimuli.

philosophy, we are getting dangerously close to the crossroads where the insects took one road and the ancestors of the mammals took another. It might not (at least in anything less than many millions of years) conduct us to a termite colony and the kind of life led in it, but it might well lead us to a society of the sort you find described in a science-fiction nightmare.

Essay topic: In Skinner's book *Walden II*, one of the leaders of his ideal community claims that behavioral engineering teaches a self control that leads to better education and greater happiness than conventional education does. Why, then, does Krutch criticize “the behavioral sciences”? Explain why you agree or disagree with Krutch.