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THE FIGHT FOR FREE WILL

BY DOTTIE CARTLAND

Conformity, control, cultural engineering—ambiguous words that emerge again and again in convocation speeches and classroom discussions; sometimes regarded with patronizing benevolence, clothed in “glittering generalities;” more often scorned, painted in blackest hues, and posed as evil adversaries of the ever-combatant “Free Will.” Is it possible to analyze these concepts objectively, to examine them as neither bogies nor saviors of society? How important is their influence on the behavior and thinking of modern man?

We are constantly reminded that the American people operate en masse, that there is a growing trend toward conformity. No longer can we find the “inner-directed” man, whom David Reisman described in *The Lonely Crowd*, one who is guided as by a personal gyroscope. In his place we have the “other-directed” individual, whose sole equipment for gaining experience is a set of antennae. Thus he functions merely as a receiving set for group ideas. No one likes to think of himself as a chameleon-like creature who takes on each changing shade of his environment. If we accept this interpretation, we find ourselves a sadly degenerate humanity!

Joseph Wood Krutch, in *The Measure of Man*, writes words of hope to those of us who view with alarm the increasing obscurity of human values. It is his contention that we *need not* sacrifice our belief in the free will of man. He launches a vigorous attack on the materialistic system of thought devised by Freud, Marx, and Darwin, and adopted by B. F. Skinner, twentieth century behaviorist psychologist.

Members of our psychology department at Denison have allied themselves with Skinner in maintaining that the concept of Free Will merits careful re-examination. Current developments in the science of the mind require us to take a realistic rather than an

idealistic view. On the basis of Dr. Skinner’s textbook, *A Science of Human Behavior* and his novel, *Walden Two*, I have attempted to surmise how he would reply to the criticisms Krutch makes of his cherished theory, environmental determinism.

In his analysis of our so-called “Age of Anxiety,” Krutch holds that the people of almost every period in history have had the same hypochondriacal tendency to think of their own times as more troubled than those of previous generations. Psychologists might agree with that name for this age with one reservation: that man is naturally a worrying animal—that he always *has* been anxious and always *will be*. What then—we may ask—makes the distinctive mood of an age?

Krutch believes that what we think is related to what happens, and that by a continued pessimistic attitude we guide ourselves toward a conviction of coming disaster—and this conviction in turn becomes synonymous with the disaster itself. Going along with his reasoning, we must renounce absolute predestination, for whenever we “guide ourselves,” regardless of the direction in which we move, we demonstrate that fate is not the arbitrary ruler of our lives. But Krutch’s analysis can be disputed—and would be by Skinner. It is experience which creates the mood of an age—the psychologist would say—and our age of anxiety is the result of two world wars and an economic depression. This emphasis on cause and effect clearly illustrates Skinner’s deterministic philosophy.

The morass in which we of the mid-twentieth century appear to be foundering might be attributed to a cultural lag: man’s ingenuity has outrun his intelligence. When wisdom and good do not keep pace with the necessity for them, says Krutch, we have two alternatives: we can simplify, in the manner of Thoreau, by returning to a political and social order which we would be capable of managing; or we can “get wise,” as was advised by H. G. Wells. Skinner would elaborate on Wells’ contention for wisdom by encouraging the development of a science of human behavior; thus he would help decrease the differential between our relatively meager understanding of people and our encyclopedic knowledge of technology and of the physical world.

Krutch stands firmly in his belief that there is such a thing as free will—that man has the ability to recognize good and evil and to make decisions accordingly—for without this belief we would be powerless to act at all. “Not so!” our behaviorist psychologist would reply. “When a man is able to recognize that his actions

are determined by controlling factors in his environment, and when he learns what these factors are, he comes closer to freedom than does the man who assumes that human behavior is capricious and unpredictable."

Marx, Freud, and Darwin were all engaged in destroying belief in man's autonomy and in proving that the human is a product of forces outside his control. Building on the premises that (1) man is an animal, and (2) an animal is a machine, their logical conclusion was that man is a machine. Krutch accuses them of choosing the mechanical aspect of man because it was the easiest to study; he states defiantly that this is not the complete answer to an understanding of mankind. For example, the electronic calculator is as close to having human qualities as a machine can come, for it can "think." But it is not conscious of itself; it is not capable of imagination, curiosity, emotion, sympathy; nor can it have preference. These qualities compose what Krutch calls the "universe of consciousness," which distinguishes man from both animal and machine.

"Perhaps so," Skinner might say, "but looking at man as a machine is a beginning toward a scientific knowledge about him, and it gives us something practical on which to base our studies. If we can discover, through experiments with a rat or a dog, useful principles which are effective in dealing with human beings, why shouldn't we assume that man has certain mechanical qualities? We should be thankful for the similarities that exist between animals and humans!"

Another fear Krutch expresses is that "merely by being treated as though he could do nothing for himself man is, perhaps, becoming less capable of doing so." If he can do nothing for himself, will there be any limits on what may be done to him? Skinner would answer reassuringly that not only are people constantly being controlled by those around them, but they in turn are exercising control over others in various ways. It is a two-way proposition, so the danger of one person becoming overly-persecuted is relatively small.

In a chapter entitled "Ignoble Utopias," Krutch gives his evaluation of the Walden Two community—or "institution," as he calls it. In speaking of Frazier's "scientific ability to control men's thoughts with precision, thereby causing them to think benevolently and tolerantly," he points out the horrifying idea that Walden Two is devoid of thinking individuals! The products of such a conditioning

agency would be something less than human. Frazier—who is the spokesman for Skinner in the novel—might defend himself with this variation of the "end-justifies-the-means" rationalization: "When I educate people to think benevolently and tolerantly I am merely putting into immediate practice what theologians and moralists have been advocating for centuries. They may criticize my methods, but mine have brought results where theirs have failed." To reinforce his position Skinner might also quote Henry Huxley, who said:

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 should instantly close with the offer.

In his re-examination of our society's value judgments and of the ultimate ends we seek to attain, Krutch criticizes Skinner's definition of the "good life"—that which contributes to the health of the individual and the long-continued survival of the society—by asking, "survival for what?" This proves a difficult question for me to answer on Skinner's behalf, and I can only guess at his possible reply: "The Walden Two society should survive to produce great works of art, literature, and music." At least its residents had plenty of leisure to devote to such pastimes—though I question whether leisure is the only condition conducive to outstanding creativity. Shouldn't we reverse the situation, however, and ask the theologians, philosophers, and artists, "What do *you* wish to survive for? What basically are you trying to do?" When we consider carefully their ultimate goals, we are apt to admit that most of them are striving to end man's inhumanity to man, to devise a way for people to live together comfortably and enjoy the wonders of God's world. Even the satirists and naturalists in literature, for example, pursue these same ends when they point up the worst in life so that people will strive for, and appreciate the best. In the light of this argument, Skinner could say that in the Walden Two community he has already achieved the goals which make the survival of a society worth while.

In my opinion, one of Krutch's strongest arguments against the environmental determinists is that they are so dogmatic—they take the "nothing but" attitude that man is the product of the economic, sociological, and psychological factors in his past history and can therefore have no autonomous powers. While Krutch has devised a minimal definition of a man, the behaviorists have taken

the maximal view. Admitting that we are far from being entirely autonomous, Krutch at the same time denies that we are absolutely powerless to control our own behavior. The "Minimal Man," who is even *sometimes* capable of independent choices—even if they are nothing more than tastes or preferences—is not completely the victim of environment. His reasoning is something more than mere rationalization. He is both an individual and part of an aggregate. As an individual he can exercise free will but as part of a group his behavior is primarily determined. In short, Krutch is saying, "One must be aware of the extent to which one is free." Skinner would say, "One must be aware of the extent to which one is controlled."

These men represent two poles of the magnet we see as free will. Krutch stands as a positive force, Skinner as a negative. Each of us may choose either pole we prefer. The *choice* itself gives encouragement to the believer in autonomous man. On the other hand, the person making the decision bristles with positive or negative ions he has acquired through his living with others—ions that will ultimately determine the direction of his attraction.
