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## "What Price Utopia?"

B. F. Skinner

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B.F. Skinner  
“What Price Utopia?”  
May 24, 1964  
Reed College

PSU Library Special Collections and University Archives  
Oregon Public Speakers Collection  
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Transcribed by Nina Gulbranson, July 2020  
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HOST: [recording begins mid-sentence] ...I will mention that he's a member of the National Academy of Sciences, among other things. My earliest memory of Dr. Skinner goes back quite some years: 1938, he wrote a book called *The Behavior of Organisms*. And in this book, he made a statement which shocked the psychological community. Every good psychologist in those days raised on the Watsonian behavioristic tradition knew that a response could not possibly occur had there not been a stimulus preceding it, and well-bred psychologists would manufacture stimuli if they couldn't observe them to explain the responses they observed. Skinner had the courage to come out and say there are responses for which there are no stimuli. He said, "Why should we talk about stimuli if we don't see them?" He said, "Let's divide behavior into two classes. Let's talk about stimulated or elicited behavior as we have in the past, but let's introduce a new category of behavior which we will call emitted behavior." Which is a very honest way of facing up to the fact that many of the things which living organisms do are not related in a one-to-one fashion with observable stimuli. Well, he was known in those days as Peck's bad boy in psychology; he shocked people in various ways. This is just one of them. Just demolishing some of the shibboleths that we firmly attached ourselves to for many years.

Well, about ten years later he wrote a book which I think most of you are familiar with, called *Walden Two*, in which, after many years of working on the analysis of behavior—I'm not going

to call him a behaviorist; that might shock him... [laughter] ...we'll call him a behavioral analyst; I think that'll get by all right. [laughs] He wrote this book *Walden Two*, which I know a number of you in the audience have read. It's been read in this senior symposium, and I'll not comment on that because I think that's what he's going to talk about tonight. In one of his fairly recent articles, an article entitled "Behaviorism at Fifty," he's willing to call himself a behaviorist, but it's quite different from the behaviorism of fifty years ago. He has this to say, and I'll read it directly: "The basic issue is not the nature of the stuff of which the world is made, or whether it is made of one stuff or two. But rather, the dimensions of the things studied by psychology and the methods relevant to them."

Some people have rather naively accused Dr. Skinner of being a logical positivist. Well, he isn't. He is not one of these nothing-but logical positivists. But Skinner has the courage and the insight to realize that a theory of psychology, in order to—and he says he's not theoretical but I think he is—in order to make progress and to lead to a science of human behavior, must be concerned with the observables.

Now, so much for psychology. I think he's going to talk about something quite different this evening, and so I'll cease and let him.

[applause]

B.F. SKINNER: Thank you, Professor Courts. Ladies and gentlemen, the novel that Professor Courts has mentioned, *Walden Two*, is, I trust, familiar to some of you. I wrote it nearly twenty years ago now and I wrote it in dead earnest. It described what seemed to me to be the good life. What I'd had in mind, as a matter of fact, the English country life of the 19th century, except that I thought that I'd solved the servant problem. Everybody made his contribution, but everybody enjoyed the kind of life that is described for the upper classes in, let us say, the novels of Anthony Trollope. It was done, as some of you know, by arranging a community of about a thousand people under the guidance of a behavioral psychologist named Frazier. Frazier would work things out in semi-isolation in America today so that in this community, working conditions were pleasant and productive with a minimum of unpleasant diversive labor; where child care was skillfully designed; and where education prepared everyone for the kind of life he was going to lead. Where conditions were arranged to maximize personal health; sanitation, medical services, and so on were good; and one was free of that compulsive drivenness which breeds so many forms of illness. With plenty of leisure and every provision was made for enjoying it actively, positively. Arts flourished, music flourished, literature flourished. Science was encouraged, particularly that science of behavior upon which the whole enterprise hinged. And particularly, social contacts were easily made and easily maintained.

This seemed to me not only a good way to live but a plausible one. I thought that even then, the science of behavior which was emerging would be able to specify how such a world could be achieved. And I thought it was inevitable with increasing knowledge.

Now, to my very real surprise, the book generated a violent reaction. *Life* magazine devoted an editorial to it, beginning by referring to a piece of equipment that my wife and I worked out for the care of our second baby, the so-called "mechanical baby tender." *Life* makes some completely erroneous predictions about the awful effect this might have on a baby thus reared and then continues as follows: "But the menace of the mechanical baby tender is as nothing compared to the menace of books like *Walden Two*, where Dr. Skinner's utopia is a triumph of behavioral engineering and cultural engineering, where the conditioned reflex is king. Boards of planners unobtrusively tell every big and little Skinnerite exactly what he must do, and once they are trained the inhabitants of *Walden Two* have quote "freedom" unquote, but it is the freedom of those Pavlovian dogs which are free to foam at the mouth whenever the dinner bell invites them to a non-forthcoming meal." [laughter] It's interesting to note that Pavlov's dogs merely salivated; it's only the editors of *Life* that foam at the mouth. [laughter] I won't read the whole editorial, but this one sentence strikes me as strong enough. "Such a triumph of mortmain or the dead hand has not been envisioned since the days of Sparta."

And shortly after that, Joseph Wood Krutch, a distinguished man of letters, wrote a book called *The Measure of Man* which was in large part an attack on *Walden Two*. Now, I'll have something to say about his attitude later. Then two specialists in utopia, Negley and Patrick, published a book called *A Quest for Utopia* in which they commented on *Walden Two* in the following way: "Halfway through this contemporary utopia, the reader may feel as sure as we did that this is a beautifully ironic satire on what has been called behavioral engineering. The longer one stays in this better world of the psychologist, however, the plainer it becomes that the inspiration is not satiric but messianic. This is indeed a behaviorally engineered society, and while it was to be expected that sooner or later the principle of psychological conditioning would be made the basis of a serious construction of utopia, yet not even the effective satire of Aldous Huxley is adequate preparation for the shocking horror of the idea when positively presented." So much for my good life. [laughter] For a world that seemed to me to be very nearly ideal.

There has been, as these samples indicate, not only in respect to *Walden Two*, a rash of what could be called anti-utopian literature. George Kateb has recently published a book called *Utopia and its Enemies*, a title which is obviously a paraphrase of Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*, in which he raises the question of the anti-utopians and asks what is happening. Is it really true that we don't want the good life? Are we afraid, for example, of

being happy? And if not, what is the reason for all the violence of attacks on utopian speculation at the present time? I want to try to answer that question, but I want to begin first with a brief summary of utopian writing so that we can get some idea of what it is really all about.

It begins of course with Plato and *The Republic*. Plato was thinking of something like a Greek city-state but one under the control of a great ruler. So far as Plato knew, you had a great age when you had a great ruler, and hence the solution of the philosopher-king would suggest itself. It's not a very satisfactory solution, it really says that I don't exactly know how this city-state should be run, but I imagine there is someone who does know and I will put him in the position of a philosopher-king. It is true that Plato had some explicit proposals. He wanted to get rid of the poets, for example, and did to some extent design a world which should presumably work whether or not a man was standing around to exert remedial action. The Republic was almost tried. The emperor, Roman emperor Gallienus, was once on the point of giving the philosopher Plotinus a captured city so that he might try Plato's Republic, when the emperor was called away by affairs of state and forgot all about it, possibly fortunately for Plotinus.

There are those who think that the next utopian vision was really the Christian kingdom of God. One theologian has speculated on this, and of course St. Augustine carried this forward in essentially a utopian fashion, painting a picture of the city of God. But it was Thomas More in his *Utopia*, many centuries later, who gave this kind of thinking a name and proposed a kind of good world, a good society based not necessarily on just the machinations of a great ruler but upon a lawful, reasoned design. This was beginning to be the age of reason, and More was sure that if man simply used his intelligence he could draw up a plan, a kind of constitutional government, really, where law and order would be sufficient to maintain a good life.

Shortly after that, within the century, Francis Bacon in *The New Atlantis* set up the same kind of thing, appealing again to principles of reason but adding one modern fillip. He wanted to call in the scientists. And so he just describes Salomon's house, an institution in which scientists are brought together to solve problems. They were not exactly behavioral scientists but they were... their specialties were at least relevant to the success of the community.

Now meanwhile, however, there had begun to appear evidence that reason, civilization, governmental order were not necessarily what was needed. This evidence came from the South Seas, by the circumnavigators of the globe, who brought back glowing reports of something very little short of the good life, certainly; especially appearing to be so to sailors who had been cooped up in a ship for many months. Mainly the life then, in say Tahiti, which didn't seem to

be the result of well-designed government but just the natural goodness of people; free, in fact, of government. And this led to speculations about the necessity for the kind of reasoned planning which More, Bacon, and others were proposing. As a matter of fact, this objection to the inadequacy of reason goes back to More's time, because his very good friend Erasmus wrote a little book which was essentially a pun on More's name. More in... the root "mor" in Latin means "fool," and so Erasmus wrote a book *In Praise of Folly* dedicating it to his friend, in which he pointed out that law and order might be very well, but what made the world go 'round was what Erasmus called "folly," but what today we would call "positive reinforcement." [laughter]

The noble savage motif, of course, culminated in Rousseau, who worked out a whole philosophy of the origin of government from it, and led to a lot of utopian writing down into at least the middle of the 19th century, in which people simply described idyllic conditions, usually laid in the South Seas, as a matter of fact, where life went on in a way which seemed to satisfy everything that man could possibly desire. These were the utopias that Karl Marx objected to. It's often today a custom to call Marx a utopian, but he was himself an anti-utopian and what he meant by that was that the wonderful way of life described by the utopias of his day neglected one thing: How could you bring this all about? Well certainly anarchy didn't do it, certainly a lack of government was not the solution. If you took government away from Western civilization, you would not end with the civilization or lack of it found in Tahiti.

Marx complained, then, that no attention was being given to bringing about the good life, and he picked up a new solution which had not yet appeared in the history of utopian writing. Namely, that you needed wealth to be happy, and the only way to get wealth was to produce it and to distribute it fairly. This again was an older idea going back to the 18th century. Adam Smith said it, "The wealth of nations is what nations produce," and that remarkable man Diderot with his *Encyclopedia* actually set about trying to build a better world simply by making processes of production familiar to all. In Diderot's day, the techniques of producing goods, mining, planting and so on, were often kept secret by guilds or families. Diderot had the remarkable idea that if you could only collect all of the information possible about technology in the production of things and make this available, then people would become more productive and that would solve all our problems. And so, of course, he carried out this enormous project of the *Encyclopedia*, in which very good artists were sent out to draw pictures showing how coal was mined, metals were mined, glass was produced, silverware made, and so on. The fantastic kinds of information there about the techniques of the day. The theme was—it was a very simple theme—that if people once knew how to do all of this, they'd go ahead and do it and everybody would be well-off, and that would be the end of the problem.

And this was the theory, the utopian theory of the 19th century, and it comes down to us today in simple socialism that production is the cue; and it led to utopias such as Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, in which the good life has been achieved by economic means. Bellamy pictures the Boston of the year 2000, where most problems have been solved thanks in part to a distribution of goods through a system which might be called Sears Roebuck nationalized. And thus you were able to get what you wanted, and that was to solve everything. I think that has been tried out by now, and there is something less than adequate in the simple economic solution. Because Diderot did make available techniques of production, but it did not follow that people started producing, and the distribution of goods in the theme of "to each according to his need" certainly did not generate the incentives which would maintain the supply of goods needed for any such program.

Earlier, people were aware of the need for something else. Even Thomas More and Bacon knew that more than legalistic devices would be needed. Rousseau was a very sophisticated man and didn't take the noble savage too seriously. Marx was in part a psychologist and knew that a lot of behavioral engineering would be needed to make the economic theories work. But it remained for the twentieth century to complete this story by turning at last to the psychological solution. Now curiously enough, the great figure of the 20th century, Freud, did not lead to very much utopian speculation. I dare say there are Freudians who could make suggestions as to the organization of society with respect to the good life, but there are no outstanding utopias, I think, in this tradition.

The other figure of the period, Pavlov, got into it entirely by accident. Pavlov was a rather genial, good natured, materialistic scientist of the 19th century whose work was completed essentially before the Communist revolution. But because his theories and his results fitted the program of the Communist party, they made him a god. Later they rejected him for political reasons, but then took him up again, and he is still the great Russian hero, or the great Russian god, and things being as they are, he is the great American devil for the same reason. His own writings and that of his students never approached the scope of utopian speculation. But Aldous Huxley did undertake to picture a world in which the conditioned reflex was indeed king. This is of course, in *Brave New World*. The theme of *Walden Two* is also of course psychological, and I think the techniques which are described there are more effective than those to which Huxley appeals.

Now, that is roughly the state of utopia writing now; I think other current utopias are basically psychological in nature, the belief being that something more than political or economic measures are needed, and this something more is to be found in psychological processes. Now, we are actually not, however, when we reach this point, dealing with anything very far in the

future. People think of utopias as dreams of another day of a future time, but this is not so. Huxley, in a very pious way, recently complained in *Brave New World Revisited* that he was surprised at the speed with which *Brave New World* seemed to be coming true. But the fact of the matter is it was already true when he wrote it. With the exception of some technical devices, such as a way of raising embryos in bottles, and a mass media medium called the "feelies," the psychological processes involved were all old hat.

For example, he argues that people have to become interested in sports activities requiring elaborate apparatus simply because in this way you provided something for industry to do. Now, that wasn't anything in the future, that was good old Rooseveltian-Keynesian economics in the early 30's when the book came out. He talks about soma, the emotion surrogate drug, knowing full well that alcohol has always served this purpose, and Huxley himself remained interested in improvements on alcohol [laughter] with writing a book on the subject and interesting himself in psychopharmacological research on the West Coast till his death.

The use of conditioning, conditioned reflexes, was also perfectly well-established. You'll remember he describes the problem of how to make sure that people who are going to be servants can be dissuaded from taking an interest in the beauties of nature or literature because this will be a distraction. So the children who are to become members of that class are put in a room on a floor, and along one edge there are bouquets of flowers and beautiful books. And the babies naturally crawl toward these, reach out and touch, and they're shocked. And they pull back, and they go ahead, touch again and they're shocked and pull back, and after a very few experiences they lose all interest in nature and literature and are prepared for a life of very simple service. Now, we do the same thing, we manufacture small attractive objects which we put in living rooms on low coffee tables [laughter] and we allow babies to crawl toward them and reach out, and as they touch we slap them on the back of the hand. Now, the difference between the shock and the slap is quite trivial and, as a matter of fact, if you want to be scientific, you can now buy small electric probes. [laughter]

Now the fact that he called the book *Brave New World* is significant. Miranda in *The Tempest* exclaims, "O brave new world that has such creatures in it!" and she is talking about these men who have been shipwrecked on the island; citizens of contemporary Italy. There is nothing in the future about it. And the French title *Le Meilleur Des Mondes* is taken from Voltaire's *Candide*, when Pangloss, in Leibnizian fashion, refers to the "best of all possible worlds"; and of course he's talking about the world of the present time. Actually *Brave New World* is simply Huxley's protest against the life he was already immersed in. And I was amazed to discover how true this also is of *Walden Two*.



I thought I was talking to some extent, at least, about the future, even though I argued that this could occur in America at the present time. But a friend of mine convinced me that there is nothing new in *Walden Two* at all. He was an economist, is an economist, and he came to me one day several years ago quite disturbed. He said, "I hear that you are really thinking of trying an experiment of something like *Walden Two*." He said, "You're in real danger. This is a community, so you're going to be called a communist. And this is going to be troublesome, you'll get into all kinds of trouble, but I have worked out a way in which you can avoid that and I'm here to tell you about it." He said, "Now, for example, you'll say that in *Walden Two* a person who has lived his active life in the community and then grows old and nonproductive is nevertheless entitled to stay and enjoy all of the privileges free. Don't say that." He said, "Say you'll have your own social security. And now you say that when you are ill you can go to the doctor and get attention and pay nothing, go to the hospital if you need to, no charge of any sort. Don't say that, say you have your own Blue Cross, Blue Shield." [laughter] He said, "It's all right to have your schools free, because we do have public schools free and some state universities are very cheap and so on, that's not communism; but don't describe people going into the dining room and eating and walking out without paying, or going for a suit of clothes to a shop of some kind and walking out. Or not paying rent for their room and so on. Keep records and then don't simply say... [laughter] don't say that all you have to do is to work off a certain number of labor credits and you've satisfied your duty, your responsibility to the community. Work out wages and keep records on that. Then at the end of each year, you total up expenditures and earnings and if a man has spent more than he has earned, you put him through voluntary bankruptcy and start him all over again." [laughter] "But if he has earned more than he has spent, you confiscate the difference as income tax." [laughter] And there is a point... there is a point that all of the issues in utopian writing are either true at the time they're proposed, or they come true very quickly.

As a matter of fact, Plato's *Republic* is closer than you think. In the 18th century a French architect, Ledoux, drew up a city plan for the republic. And it was his student Pierre L'Enfant who Washington called in to design the city of Washington D.C., and L'Enfant used Ledoux's plan. So you see, Washington D.C. is very much like the republic of Plato. But it is also true that Salomon's house in 'The New Atlantis' came true. Within a very few years a royal society was founded, and it was explicitly and admittedly patterned after Salomon's house in *The New Atlantis*. And here you have *Brave New World* as a critique of current life, and *Walden Two* is essentially nothing but a reapplication of current principles, in not only not having to come true, but actually being true. And the editors of *Fortune* magazine, one of those publications that doesn't know what another thinks, wrote a rather favorable review of *Walden Two* but concluded with this statement, that "the problem now is not how to achieve utopia but how to prevent it." [laughter]

Now if this is true, what is this all about? Utopian thinking is really nothing but a kind of thinking that we are very likely to engage in in America, and as a matter of fact very proud of. We very seldom accept a way of doing something without examining where it came from, whether it couldn't be changed so that a better result could be achieved. We certainly do this with respect to physical processes and physical technology. We don't... the farmer doesn't go very long plowing with one piece of equipment before at least someone turns up selling him a better piece of equipment. There are annually better ways of doing things in the home, better ways of doing things in industry, plants are revised frequently, we have to have a new car every once in a while because better ways of building cars and driving them and so on keep coming along. This is standard Western thinking, particularly American thinking.

And you have only to visit some culture where this is not the practice to realize how much we have accepted it as a normal thing. I was recently in Egypt, and as anyone who goes to Egypt always tells you, as you go up the Nile you see people plowing the fields. They usually have two animals that are not well-matched, one may be a camel and one a donkey or something, and they are linked together by a long pole which keeps them far enough apart so they can't get at each other. Then there's a pole taking off from the middle of that and a plow at the end. And this is... this thing goes back and forth across the fields plowing in a rather inadequate way. Then you go to one of the tombs and you look at the wall carvings and paintings and there you see exactly the same rig used in exactly the same way, three, thirty-five hundred, four thousand years before. It's a shocking thing if you haven't seen it, and yet it exemplifies how very different cultures can be in this respect.

And we are clearly at one extreme of the culture which is constantly inquiring whether or not there isn't a better way of doing something. And now, you have only to compare what might be called physical technology with what might be called social technology to see that utopian thinking is precisely of the same sort. You don't accept a practice, let us say, a way of raising children, without seeing if there isn't possibly some better way to raise children. Someone invents the kindergarten, for example. Someone invents better materials for use in school. We are always thinking, or trying to think of better ways to educate. Industrialists are interested in better ways of paying wages or arranging for incentive systems and so on. Governments are always trying out new ways, for example, of collecting taxes, things of that kind. These are social inventions, they're social technologies and in this culture, in Western civilization, they are also subject to scrutiny and to suggestions for change. It is part of our way of thinking about the way in which we live, to speculate about the possibility of improvement.

And the only feature of a utopia is that the whole thing is done as kind of a package deal. Instead of just working on education alone and finding that all of what you've done has been swept away by family practices or governmental practices or something, you decide to change everything. You change the family practice and the education and the government. And this is an attractive thing, if you could imagine being able to do this, you would certainly be able to design systems which would be much more efficient in the long run.

Now then, if this is the case, why all the fuss? What is back of anti-utopian thinking? These attacks on proposals to build a better world. They seem to be attacks on utopias because utopias are weak, they're nothing but dreams or guesses. But back of it, there is implied an attack on any kind of improvement in the way in which we do things; in the design of our cultural practices. The possibility that this is an attack, this is fear of success, has to be taken into account. It looks as if with the arrival of psychological techniques, in addition to legal and economic, that they might work, and that brings in its train a series of anxieties and fears about the consequences.

One of these, of course, is our longstanding fear of being controlled by other people. That's a well-founded fear which we possess for a very good reason. Usually people control other people with techniques that are extremely unpleasant. The bully beats up the people he controls or robs, the master whips the slave, and so on. And we have long struggled for political freedom from that kind of control, from forcible coercion, from punitive methods, and I think no one would want to reverse that trend and say that somehow or other that kind of control is for any reason whatsoever desirable.

But there are ways of controlling people which are not, in themselves, aversive. Brainwashing is by definition a type of control that does not breed counter-control or revolt. It's concealed control. And although there are ways in which people are controlled which they do not resist, they can still be exploited, and in the long run if they are exploited they also object to the control. Once they discover it and once they discover what has happened to them, they also object to that. So whether the techniques are in themselves unpleasant or possibly quite enjoyable, the fact that someone is controlling to the disadvantage of the controllee is sufficient reason for us to object and to insist that that kind of control not be tolerated, and certainly do everything we can to escape from it.

But there is another possibility that a person in the position of controller should not actually exploit, and I think that is a fair description of the protagonist in *Walden Two*; and yet in a sense he is in control. And generalizing from the kinds of control we fear, we are likely to reject any kind of control. Now the character portrayed in *Walden Two* has no current effect on anyone

directly. He has no, he gets no undue share of the proceeds. But it is true that he drew up the plan. This was Frazier designing the way in which a thousand people are now living, and because he is in that position of a designer, many people would reject what he has designed even though he himself no longer is in the position of a controller. Suppose that Mr. Krutch, who has objected to this violently on just this ground, were to go out one day for a walk in his beloved Southwest where he now lives, and suppose he came across an unexplored plateau or mesa. And supposed he climbed up on it and came upon a tribe of Indians there living in a style very similar to that of *Walden Two*. They are productive as needed; under enjoyable conditions they educate for the life they are to lead; they are engaged in artistic activities and so on. Friendly relations prevail among them, and all of that. I suggest that Krutch would come down out of the mountain and say, "What fools we all are. Why not go and live that way? Here is the good life actually being practiced now." Until someone said to him, "But I forgot to tell you, Mr. Krutch, that way of life was worked out by an old Indian named Frazier." [laughter] And that would spoil it all. It's a kind of racism of ideas, and it isn't the current practice that counts, it's where it came from. It's like saying that artificial diamonds are not the equivalent of natural diamonds even though for industrial purposes they have the same effect, because one is manmade and one is the real thing.

Krutch seems to feel that the only acceptable way of life which we can tolerate is one which comes to us from a series of accidents, from all of the curious sources which have led to the practices we now enjoy. He's afraid of design, he's afraid that if you plan, then the unplanned cannot possibly "erupt again," as he puts it. It's a prejudice based on the source of practice, rather than the actual effect of that practice in strengthening the group which observes it. As far as I can see, this is an unnecessary generalization from objectionable kinds of control to a kind which is inevitable if we are to use our heads in improving the way in which we live. Somebody invented the kindergarten. It is literally true that every child that goes to kindergarten today is in some sense living a life which was designed by that man. In some sense, that man meddled in their affairs, and in some sense he is controlling their lives. But the only alternative would be to adopt practices for the care of small children which could not be identified with any man, and that seems to me a very silly possibility.

Another real objection to a designed world is in its product. For some strange reason, no one seems to be able to view with equanimity the possibility that people are happy. We have been told—and I suspect this is Freud—we have been told that only unhappiness leads to achievements of any importance. And the constant complaint that I get from people that read *Walden Two* is that the people in it are so awfully happy they'll not do anything; they will not be interested in the arts, they will not be interested in science, and so on. It is a strange thing to ask whether or not, now that happiness is within some kind of reach, we really don't want it at

all. Yet there are those who feel that without anxieties, without frustrations, without fears, man would do nothing. So that actually if you now suppose that it is possible to eliminate from our daily life the things which have led to unhappiness, that everything would go out with it. We would have a happiness, but of a vegetative nature, and nothing more could follow.

This is, to some extent, an example of another kind of objection, which takes the form of arguing that if such a system worked, it would simply prove that a science of behavior is correct and that human behavior is indeed the product of the genetic endowment and the environmental history of man. And that is something very few people are willing to accept. Because on the strength of this, you have to conclude that certain highly admired characteristics of human behavior are no longer to be found in the scientific picture. There are things we admire largely because that is the only way we can get people to do them. For example, we admire the hero in battle, because we can't conceive of any other way of getting people to fight.

Now we are interested in arriving at a world of peace. In that world, there will be no more military heroes. Should we object? Is there something missing which is fundamental to man that would be denied him in that case? Moral heroism is the same issue. There are conditions under which it is very difficult to be good, and the worse the conditions, the more we admire people who are good. And if you could now construct conditions under which people are naturally good, it would be nothing to admire at all. You'd have no opportunity for moral heroism, and many people feel that something basically human would be left out of such a picture. As a matter of fact, one of the contemptuous comments on utopia takes just this line. T.S. Eliot speaks of "systems so perfect that no one will need to be good." Doesn't mean they won't behave well, they will behave exactly as they would if they had been good under old conditions. But things will be so designed that they will naturally behave that way, they'll not need to wrestle with the devil, struggle with their consciences and so on, and will naturally behave in the way someone has planned.

Whenever social progress moves forward it usually eliminates occasions for admirable behavior. For example, our medical science would be delighted if it could eliminate entirely from the world suffering, physical suffering. And yet we have long admired the patient sufferer; and in a world in which there was no physical suffering, there would be nothing of that sort to admire. All sorts of progress deprive men of the chance of the opportunity to be admired, and yet that is a direction in which we naturally move. For example, we admire a man who keeps an appointment without using a memorandum or a secretary to remind him. We admire a man who can recite a poem rather than a person who can merely read one. We admire a person who can do mental arithmetic more than one who uses an adding machine or a calculating

machine. Yet we invent memoranda and text and adding machines precisely to make the other more difficult kind of behavior unnecessary. And in that kind of progress, we do somewhat reduce the characteristics of human behavior we have formerly admired. Plato himself voiced that objection; he reports that objection to the invention of the alphabet. He said with the alphabet, people will seem to know things which they have merely read. This is a philosophy that educators can't possibly accept today. [laughter]

Any kind of progress is bound to reduce the scope of these older, more difficult forms of behavior. Which also came from outside but nevertheless did not give us occasion... it did give us occasion to admire the individual as if the thing is something inside him.

There's another argument which C.S. Lewis deals with particularly, and also Krutch, that man is not able to control his own destiny if this view is correct. If it is true that you can design an environment in which people will behave in specific ways, then, as Krutch says, this is a dead end. That it is no longer possible for man to control his destiny.

But this is patently untrue. Man has always controlled himself by controlling the environment in which he lives. If it is true that the behavior of each of us is entirely determined by our genetic endowment, our genetic history and what has happened to us in our lifetime, it is still possible that we may be able to control both of those. The geneticists are beginning to talk at any rate of manipulating the germ plasm and actually modifying man's genetic endowment. To some extent, proposals to do this through selective breeding have the same effect. But men have always been controlling the environment which controls their behavior. They're always building worlds in which they behave in certain ways, which are for one reason or another preferable to other ways. And communities such as *Walden Two* are precisely inventions of this sort. The community described in the Dead Sea Scrolls... was...

[audio cuts out and resumes] pattern... setting a pattern, pretty much, for the monastic communities of the Christian era, in which men submitted to an extremely disciplined environment just in order that their lives might then take on a certain pattern. They could not be good, they could not behave themselves on their own in the world at large. But they could organize and maintain a community in which they did indeed behave in specific ways. [audio skips and resumes] ...St. Augustine, St. Benedict and the other people who drew up plans for monastic communities, you see that this is still the theme. In order to live a life satisfying certain specifications, you build a world in which you naturally behave in acceptable ways.

The environment which controls man is controlled by men, and that is not entirely a play on words. C.S. Lewis complains about this; he says, "The power of men to make of themselves as

they please means the power of some men to make others as they please," and this is always the case. No man entirely on his own ever controls his own behavior; because he exists in a culture which has been designed by others ahead of him, he can engage in self-controlling behavior and alter his own future.

One final point. There was also a suggestion that when you have a highly, carefully designed, highly intricate and well-worked-out cultural pattern, people will be alike. This awful dread of regimentation. Now, we have regimenting notions in our own culture. Most states, for example, have syllabuses which tell you what students should be learning in the sixth, seventh, eighth grade and on until high school. No one worries about this, because you know they're not going to learn it. [laughter] But if you could imagine an effective education, you will certainly take thought as to whether you really want everyone to be alike, even if they are all equally excellent.

But there's nothing about the scientific picture upon which a design of community defense which threatens the individuality of anyone. Each of us, even if this scientific view is correct, each of us is an extraordinarily complicated and unique creature. The genetic endowment of each of us, unless there are some identical twins here, is extraordinarily varied, and the environment is varied even in the case of identical twins. We boast of our fingerprints, and the uniqueness of our fingerprints, because they happen to have practical use. But the whole body is an elaborate fingerprint with extraordinary individuality, and there's nothing in the scientific picture which questions that. The variables that lead to these individual patterns are diverse, and some of them are those unusual collections which lead to individuals of extraordinary achievement people would call geniuses. None of that is changed in the scientific picture.

So, in summary, the view which an explicit design of approach here offers is not really very frightening. It does not involve control in any sense that anyone ought to be disturbed about. It does not propose a vegetative happiness which will not lead to continued progress and development. It does not remove any genuinely admirable characteristics of man, but only those we have had to admire because man has been living in an inadequate environment. It does not raise any objection to the possibility and the proposal that man should continue to act and control his own destiny, and it does not threaten individuality. Utopian thinking is simply a speculation about the origins of the ways in which we live and the possibility that we may be able to do something about them. And I believe, as I believed when I wrote *Walden Two*, that the science of behavior has a great deal to offer, and we are in the midst of a rapidly accelerating culture in which the capacity of man to control nature is increasing, and with it his capacity to control himself.

Thank you very much.

[applause]

HOST: Dr. Skinner says that he will be glad to answer a few questions. We don't want to keep him too long, but in case some of you wish to continue the discussion on *Walden Two*, you've got a captive audience; if you feel like going it's all right with me. Look, we have time for just a few questions. You have one? Right.

[questioner in background, inaudible]

SKINNER: I think both. This is the question of to what extent we can look for counter-controlling... a kind of governor, a break on cultural design from the reactions of people being controlled. Now, we have always done this of course; the simplest way in which people control each other is through physical force. We've had to counter-control the strong man so he's not allowed to knock people down, steal from them, and so on. We have a superior force which counter-controls the individual use of force. Same thing is true of deception. There are ways in which a smart person can deceive the dull, and so we make deception wrong, and we have stronger forces which keep people from exploiting innocent people who are vulnerable to that kind of control. Now the controls that will emerge from the science of behavior, I think, must be similarly counter-control, you must not allow anyone to go to use them for his own aggrandizement, and that is why you need to design a culture in which counter-control is taken into account.

[noise interference] I'm sorry, there was somebody scooting by here.

[questioner in background, inaudible]

SKINNER: Counter-control, what, in *Walden Two*? Counter-control in the planners or the designers or what?

[questioner responds, inaudible]

SKINNER: Well, yes. Well, I thought that was fairly well-analyzed. One of the characters in the book suggests how he would make the planners more and more powerful as time went on, and eventually puts them in the position of exploiting rulers, and I thought the answers were good enough in there, I don't see the point of going into them here. If the design permits that, it's a bad design. Thus begging the question if that is necessarily the case. A culture which is so



designed that it does not provide for the control of would-be tyrants is obviously in trouble.  
Yes?

QUESTION: [partially inaudible] ...if you were in the process of establishing such a community. Is this true?

SKINNER: Now, that rumor got around partly from an article in *Harper's* magazine, in which a man that I interviewed misunderstood some things I said. I'm glad you asked that, because I want to clear this up. I've decided myself not to do anything of this sort, at least at the present time, as I happen to have some other things planned that I think are equally important in contributing to the day. But there are others who are interested. There's a committee around Washington D.C. which has meetings; there's a group in England, and they have rather good advisors; William Huxley and T.H. White are on their board of directors [...] There is a man on the West Coast who's got plans very well drawn up for this. And I get a steady trickle of letters from people who've read the book and want to join. [laughter] And they're not misled; I mean they're not crackpots or fools, they write very intelligently and have offered all sorts of services. I have an architect who is willing to design the city plan and the buildings. An economist who's got the thing worked out for small-scale enterprises and so on. There's a lot of interest in this. I've been lecturing at various colleges, and in several cases groups of students have come up and told me they were going to start one. I don't know what I should do under the circumstances. I really am in a real quandary on this. I've decided now that I will probably reply to all the people who [...] in my files, and tell them that if they would like to have their name go on a list circulated for joint information and so on, I would put them on the list and that's as far as I think I should go at the present time.

I think it would work, and I think it might be one of the most exciting things of the 20th century. And I think young people today don't have the chance of dreaming about ways of making substantial changes in their world as we did in my generation. And if the Peace Corps kind of thing shows that they represent a real wish to do something, but these measures are remedial patchwork and if you give one person a chance to think about something on the bigger scale they will naturally I think be interested, and it's too bad they don't have a chance to be more positive in their action. Yes?

QUESTION: [partially inaudible] ...explain very well how it is to be done with a small community [...] a question occurs, what do you do with things like oil, things that take tremendous organization?

SKINNER: Yes. I take it as time goes on and as these things become automated, it's quite conceivable that say one community might have in its charge a large steel factory or something of that kind. There are all kinds of problems that will arise once you conceive of a lot of these, because of the interchange, communication, and new problems that aren't there. That is quite true, and *Walden Two* is one of those escapist kinds of things where you take your steel and oil and so on from the surrounding culture, and hope to give in return for it something by way, let's say, of better knowledge of human behavior or something of that sort. Might be a good place to explore the use of teaching machines or something you don't necessarily... you're not necessarily sponging on anyone, but you're certainly not fully developing all the techniques you need. But there has been a good deal of thought given to an urban *Walden Two* rather than a rural one, and-or one that would be connected with heavy industry or some such thing as that. I don't see any basic problem here. First, it would require a considerable redesign.

[questioner in background, inaudible]

SKINNER: Well, I should suppose that this is an essay in decentralization, and you certainly would not want to create another New York; and you'd do everything you could to pull it apart into pieces and have decentralized units. I don't know why people have to get together seven or eight million at a time, but there's some force that seems to make them do it. [laughter] This is very real, and other countries are considering this, more serious than we are; other countries are really tackling this problem of the big city. Russia's worked out a... one of the reasons I thought I might go ahead with *Walden Two* was that one agency of the government showed an interest in helping for a very simple reason. They found out that the Russians were going to do something like this; they couldn't spy on Russia, but they felt they could spy on me. But the Russians have worked out city planning designs, called microraiions, which are units for five thousand people with no roads except bicycle paths and walks. There are apartment houses, a polyclinic, a school, a stadium, a factory, and so on. And you can be born, grow up and live and die in one of those without being more than one kilometer from everything you need. And they've got these books of these designs, city designs, and so on. These are going to be... as conceived, these will be side-by-side with roadways in between. I don't know how much of Russia they will all cover, but they are thinking ahead to a decentralized unit of about five thousand people. Yes?

QUESTION: [partially inaudible] ...if changing your environment is a behavior, then environment conditions [...] changing your environment [...] and this way human behavior is determined from first man.

SKINNER: That's right and I'm afraid that is the case. It does not mean that you cannot evolve better and better patterns, because that is in man's nature also. Yes?

QUESTION: [partially inaudible] ...that happiness comes, that happiness is not related to suffering, that man [...] realizes he is not suffering now, is not happy...

SKINNER: [inaudible] [laughter] I don't get this business about happiness only being available to those who have either recently or are in the presence of unhappiness on the part of somebody else. There are kinds of happiness, such as the release from a great anxiety, that you can't enjoy unless you've had a great anxiety, but in balance we're not very much better off. I don't like to see a society deliberately made frustrated so that people can enjoy reducing frustrations. Yes?

[question in background, inaudible]

SKINNER: [...] ...if you ask I will... [laughter] All I have in mind is developing some of the materials in the scientific analysis of behavior in the fields of social science in general, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, and so on. In other words, trying to bring this rather special detail and rather rigorous science into contact with human affairs on a much broader scale. The people who do experimental work tend to love what they're doing and they don't care about if anyone knows about it at all. There's not really very good public relations between the laboratory and people who might make use of these results, so I'm gonna be my mouthpiece for five years and see what happens. Yeah, in the back.

[question in background, inaudible]

SKINNER: You mean like the Kibbutzim in Israel, you mean, or the Hutterites or some of that sort?

[inaudible]

SKINNER: Yes. I did not know much about the Kibbutzim when I wrote *Walden Two*. I learned a lot since; I've talked to many people who lived there. They are living under very difficult frontier conditions with very poor capital and equipment and so on, and yet they are I think making progress. And I understand there are still in Israel a group of people who are very enthusiastic about this possibility. I don't know whether they're succeeding or failing to be much of a test of a basic idea. The other group, the Brüderhof, which was a group started in Germany in the 30s, chased out of Germany by the Gestapo and into England, and then they had to leave England during the war because they were German. The English government was very helpful and they

went to Paraguay, which is the only country that would take this medley of strange passports, and then they moved up here now, they're down by the Hudson River. And they have some villages, very Germanic in their style of living, and so the children are raised pretty much together and so on. It's to some extent an experiment I suppose, but it's based on some revealed religious principles. And the only trouble about those is God never changes his mind evidently; once he tells you how to live you're stuck with it. And the world improves and goes on, and you lose your young people because the outside world becomes too attractive in competition. It's happening to the Amana community in Iowa, it's happening to the Amish and the Hutterites in the Dakotas, and so on.

Thank you very much.

[applause]

[program ends]