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Changing Human Nature*

In a time like the present, of rapid changes and new demands, an intelligent conservatism that really *conserves* our society may come to demand rapid and intelligent change. When a man is about to be run over by an automobile, or when a world is about to be blown up, real conservatism may demand that he jump out of the way quickly. . . . A radical and ill-considered plunge into Utopianism might destroy our culture, but it is also certain to be destroyed if we go on sticking to our old military belligerence or our old uncontrolled human fertility. Our only safety therefore lies in thinking about what is best to do, in which directions we should change and adapt rapidly and in which directions we should emphasize stability.

Our situation in this problem of social design is somewhat like that of those men who took such a bold step in designing a novel kind of government for the United States. In fact, we might paraphrase *The Federalist* papers by saying, "It seems to have been reserved to the people of this generation to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good *teaching* to shape a better society from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their social training and social structure, on imitation and accident." . . .

There have been many revolutions in our time, but I think that in the long run [the] psychological revolution . . . in the theory and practice of shaping behavior of the young will be the most important revolution of all for the success and happiness of man on this planet. . . .

. . . The ease with which all our mammalian behavior can be shaped or damaged is one of the central features of the experimental psychology of the mid-Twentieth century. The psychologist Hebb and his followers have shown that the sensory deprivation of young animals leads to disorganized perceptions and reactions for the rest of their lives. . . . Skinner at Harvard has shown that dogs and pigeons can be trained in a few minutes, by his "rapid-reinforcement" methods, without any punishment, to do tricks that dogs and pigeons never did . . . before. And that human beings, with these rapid teaching methods and with the "programmed teaching" based on them, can likewise learn many things much faster and easier than was ever possible with older methods. . . .

. . . We have always tried to teach our children what we wanted them to learn and what we wanted them to be. The only difference today is that it looks as though we may soon find out how to be successful at it. It seems to me that these changes in human nature and the possibilities and choices ahead form one of the most interesting subjects in the world for contemplative men. "We know what we are, we know not what we may become," said the Christian philosopher, thinking of heaven. But I would say, if we do not know what we may become, we cannot know what we are. The maturing child only begins to realize who he is when his imagination and his planning begin to turn toward the man he will become. It is the same with a maturing society.

. . . We have a new picture of man's place, his powers, his destiny, and his responsibility. Just as our perception of the external world transcends our internal accidents of construction, so our powers now begin to transcend our biological accidents of origin. It is time to stand up free, with awareness and confidence and choice, to shape, from now on, the further development of what we will become.

* From *The Step to Man* by John R. Platt (Wiley, New York, 1966). This book contains some unusually imaginative and thoughtful essays. Two of them have appeared in *Science* (16 October 1964 and 6 August 1965).—P.H.A.