

## My Upbringing Made Me Do It: Environmental Determinism

Secular thinkers who reject biological determinism often embrace the view that human behavior is primarily the product of our upbringing and education. This became a powerful current in the nineteenth century, influencing Marxism and other forms of socialism. The behaviorist psychologists John Watson and B. F. Skinner powerfully promoted this idea in the twentieth century, claiming that humans are little more than a machine responding to stimuli. This view still has many prominent adherents in the social sciences.

**Richard Weikart** is professor of modern European history at California State University, Stanislaus, and Senior Fellow at Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture. He has published six books, including most recently *The Death of Humanity: And the Case for Life* and *Hitler's Religion*. He has also published extensively on the history of evolutionary ethics, eugenics, social Darwinism, euthanasia, and scientific racism. He has been featured in several documentaries, including Ben Stein's *Expelled*, as well as on many radio programs. He recently produced a documentary to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation called *Exploring the Reformation and Revivals in Germany*, which is available on youtube.

- I. In mid-20<sup>th</sup> century behaviorist psychologists dominated the field
  - A. Taught that humans were simply stimulus-response machines
  - B. John B. Watson as *Mechanical Man*
    1. Promised he could train child to become anything
    2. This didn't work in practice with his sons
- II. Secular thinkers who reject human free will have two options
  - A. Biological determinism
  - B. Environmental determinism (or some mixture)
    1. Some see this as kinder and gentler
    2. But it also devalues human life
    3. Communism is a form of environmental determinism
- III. Environmental determinism became popular during Enlightenment because of rise of materialism
- IV. Became even more prominent force in mid-nineteenth century
  - A. Many liberals, such as J. S. Mill, had tremendous faith in education

- B. Socialists were even more enthusiastic
  - 1. Robert Owen denied humans can make choices
    - a. His socialist colony in New Harmony, IN, collapsed
    - b. He never explained how his ideas could escape determinism
  - 2. Karl Marx
    - a. Believed changing economy would reshape humanity
    - b. This led to communist social engineering
    - c. Produced oppressive regimes
    - d. Solzhenitsyn's critique

- V. In mid-twentieth century environmental determinism thrived and still has influence
  - A. Behaviorist psychology
  - B. Anthropology – cultural relativism
  - C. Contemporary Social Sciences

- VI. Critique
  - A. Self-refuting, because if their ideas are determined then have no claim to truth
  - B. Denies moral agency

***Suggested Readings:***

Richard Weikart, *The Death of Humanity: And the Case for Life*. Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2016.

Francis Schaeffer, *Back to Freedom and Dignity*. InterVarsity Press.

B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972. Skinner was a behaviorist psychologist who embraced environmental determinism.