

... Letters

Geraldine Felton, Ed.D., R.N., JOURNAL OF NURSING ADMINISTRATION, March-April, 1975. Though the research is now several years old, it addresses the same issue.

It is hard to improve on a publication as good as SCIENCE NEWS but I would like to suggest you include more reports about clinical nursing research... This is a growing field of applied science, and as a reader, I'd like to see more SCIENCE NEWS coverage.

Sheila Adams-Leander, R.N., M.S.N.
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Animated NIMH

It was interesting to read "The (real) secret of NIMH" (SN: 8/7/82, p. 92). However, I am surprised that you did not mention that the research depicted in the movie showed not conditioning, but injections of some infecting agent. NIMH was described as a place where terrible things were done to animals for no reason whatsoever. Although the animation was great, I found the anti-science attitude of the movie objectionable.

Mary Ellen Olbrisch
University of Texas
Austin, Tex.

I was dismayed to read that John B. Calhoun attributes "altruism" to rat behavior. Such egregious anthropomorphism is tolerated in Disney script-writers for its entertainment value, but is unacceptable in a scientist.

It seems that Calhoun completely misinterpreted the programmed behavior of responding to the bell on the water dispenser. This is simply an example of that most potent of all motivations in animal experience, pleasure-seeking, even at the cost of life itself. It is the reason that insects and mammals copulate, and that human beings smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, take narcotic drugs, and eat themselves into obesity.

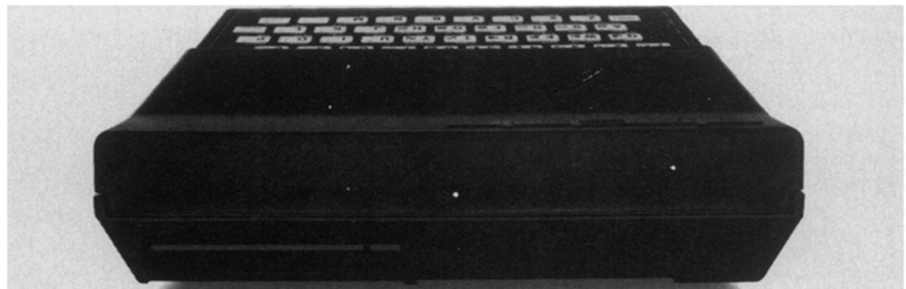
Surely Calhoun remembers the rats that would rather starve than cross an electrified grid to reach a food source, but which eagerly underwent the trial when they could have their pleasure-centers stimulated on the other side? There is no way this can be interpreted as altruism, nor any of the many other qualities revealed to the uniquely human perception of abstract concepts.

V.T. Bone
Ashland, Va.

Behaviorism has raised its cagey head once again in John Calhoun's comparison of human altruism to the behavior he taught to rats.

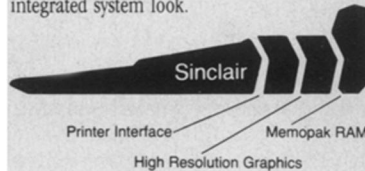
Without denying the existence of the capacity for altruism in animals—dolphins have exhibited it guiding ships at sea (and learned to read a few words, to boot!)—his equation of human and rat altruism seems a bit strained. Behaviorism here falls victim to the reductionist plague which frequently accompanies frustration with the inexplicable—or unexplained, at any rate. He may deterministically attempt to trace stimulus and response all the way back to the Big Bang, and he'll still be left with the question of what gave rise to matter and its consequent development of living human altruism. Altruism is no more a conditioned response to a bell than an effect of the Oedipal complex, natural selection, or class struggle for means of production.

John Teton
San Francisco, Calif.



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