

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

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ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Sociology, Geography, Philosophy

1. Core Definition

Environmental determinism is a philosophical and scientific doctrine asserting that human behavior, cultural development, and societal outcomes are overwhelmingly determined by external, non-genetic factors, specifically the physical and social environment. In the classic nature versus nurture debate, environmental determinism represents the extreme position of **nurture**, positing that individual differences in personality, intelligence, and moral character are directly attributable to environmental stimuli, conditioning, and socialization processes, rather than innate biological or genetic predispositions.

This concept is fundamentally rooted in the idea of causality, suggesting that if environmental conditions (such as education, parental influence, climate, or resource availability) are known, the resulting human behavior or societal structure can be predicted. The original source material clearly defines this stance: "Environmental determinism uses nurture over nature to bring about behaviour." This perspective implies that humans are largely passive recipients of environmental forces, molded entirely by the external world.

2. Etymology and Historical Development in Geography

The origins of determinist thought regarding the environment can be traced back to antiquity. Ancient Greek thinkers, notably Hippocrates, posited theories linking climate and geographical location to variations in temperament, health, and national character. However, the concept was formalized into a distinct academic doctrine during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, predominantly within the field of geography. This period sought to establish geography as a rigorous science capable of explaining global variations in human development.

Key proponents of geographic environmental determinism include German geographer **Friedrich Ratzel** (1844-1904) and his American student, **Ellen Churchill Semple** (1863-1932). Semple's influential work, *Influences of Geographic Environment* (1911), argued explicitly that humanity is a product of the Earth's surface, suggesting that climate dictates everything from economic practices (e.g., agriculture vs. nomadism) to psychological traits (e.g., diligence vs. lethargy).

Another significant figure was **Ellsworth Huntington** (1876-1947), who focused heavily on climatic determinism, arguing that moderate, fluctuating temperatures found in temperate zones were optimal for stimulating higher levels of civilization, industry, and intellectual activity, thereby explaining the dominance of European and North American societies during that era. This geographic application of environmental determinism was crucial because it provided a seemingly

scientific justification for colonialism, resource exploitation, and racial hierarchies, linking specific geographical conditions to inherent human capability or inferiority.

3. Application in Psychology: Behaviorism

While geographic determinism dominated the early 20th century, a powerful psychological variant emerged simultaneously: Behaviorism. Psychological environmental determinism argues that virtually all complex behavior is learned through interaction with the environment via processes such as classical and operant conditioning.

Leading figures like **B.F. Skinner** (1904-1990) fundamentally rejected the existence of internal mental states, cognitive processes, or genetic instructions as primary explanations for behavior. Instead, Skinner's radical behaviorism held that human actions are entirely shaped by external contingencies of reinforcement and punishment. The individual is viewed as a "black box" whose output (behavior) is wholly determined by the input (environmental stimuli and consequences). This strict adherence to environmental causation allowed behaviorists to argue that by controlling the environment--the stimuli, rewards, and punishments--behavior could be perfectly controlled and shaped, leading to significant applications in education, therapy, and social engineering.

4. Key Characteristics and Contrast with Other Determinisms

Environmental determinism is best understood by contrasting it with its ideological rivals, particularly Biological Determinism (or Genetic Determinism), as noted in the source material.

Focus on External Factors: Environmental determinism prioritizes factors external to the individual's physiology or genetics, such as climate, topography, culture, societal norms, economic systems, and learning history. The emphasis is on the surrounding conditions as the independent variables that cause human outcomes.

Rejection of Innate Traits: This school of thought minimizes or outright denies the role of inherited traits, instincts, or fixed biological characteristics in dictating complex human behaviors like language acquisition, moral development, or occupational success. Behaviorists famously viewed the human mind at birth as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate).

Emphasis on Modifiability: A central optimistic implication of environmental determinism is that, because human traits are learned, they are inherently modifiable. If undesirable behaviors or societal structures exist, they can be fixed by changing the environmental conditions (e.g., improving housing, increasing education, modifying reinforcement schedules).

Opposition to Biological Determinism: Where environmental determinism champions **nurture**, biological determinism champions **nature**, asserting that genes, hormones, and neurological

structures are the principal architects of human fate. These two concepts represent the philosophical extremes in explaining human variation, though modern science tends toward interactionist models.

5. Significance and Impact

The impact of environmental determinism has been profound, influencing public policy, educational theory, and social sciences for over a century. In psychology, the rise of behaviorism led to highly effective techniques in behavioral therapy (e.g., applied behavior analysis) and educational design that focus strictly on modifying external conditions to produce desired learning outcomes. The emphasis on the environment shifted responsibility away from inherent biological defects toward controllable external factors, which was a powerful progressive influence in areas like disability studies and early childhood education.

In public policy, the environmental determinist viewpoint fueled large-scale social engineering projects. For instance, mid-20th century urban renewal projects often operated under the premise that changing the physical environment (e.g., replacing slums with modern high-rises) would inherently cure social ills like poverty and crime, thereby demonstrating a strong belief in the causal power of external surroundings.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Environmental determinism has faced rigorous and sustained criticism across all the disciplines it has touched, leading to its relative decline as a singular, dominant theory.

In Geography: The most powerful counter-movement was Possibilism, developed by French geographer **Paul Vidal de la Blache**. Possibilism argues that while the environment certainly sets limits and presents challenges, human cultures are not predetermined by geography. Instead, humans possess agency and are capable of choosing from a range of possibilities offered by the environment, often using technology and ingenuity to overcome natural constraints. For example, while a desert environment restricts water access, different cultures may respond with highly varied solutions (e.g., irrigation, nomadic movement, desalination), demonstrating human adaptability rather than environmental dictation.

In Psychology: Radical behaviorism declined with the Cognitive Revolution in the 1960s. Critics, such as linguist **Noam Chomsky**, demonstrated that purely environmental conditioning could not adequately explain the complexity and speed of human language acquisition, suggesting the necessity of innate, biological structures (nature) that interact with the environment (nurture). Modern psychological approaches recognize gene-environment correlation and interaction, viewing behavior as a complex system resulting from biological potential meeting environmental context.

Ethical and Political Concerns: Furthermore, environmental determinism, particularly in its geographic form, was heavily criticized for its use in promoting ethnocentric, racist, and colonial ideologies. By attributing the lack of societal development in non-Western regions solely to detrimental environmental factors (like tropical climates), it provided a scientific-sounding rationale for subjugation and denied the complexity of historical, political, and cultural factors.

Further Reading

[Environmental Determinism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Behaviorism and Environmental Control](#)

[Possibilism as a Counter-Theory](#)

[Causal Determinism \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

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