
THE SKEPTICS' CORNER

by BERGEN EVANS



That opposites attract

Although Dr. Horace Gray of the Stanford University School of Medicine found, in an analysis of 271 married couples, that introverts seem, on the whole, attracted to extroverts, a number of other studies have shown that in social matters likeness attracts or, at least, strangeness repels.

Professors Burgess and Wallin, in a study of 1000 engaged couples, found that similarity in religion, background and interests was the rule. Dr. E. Lowell Kelly, in an earlier study of 3300 engaged couples, found striking similarity in each couple not only in religion and social background but in a whole series of personality traits.

One of the most curious reports was that made by Marvin Koller (in the *American Sociological Review*), who in 1948 examined the distance from home which various males in Columbus, O., ventured in the perilous search for a mate. The median

was thirteen blocks. The bolder blades, 24 to 27 years old, went further afield, but the younger men, who were probably splendidly impatient, went less. Men over 35 averaged less than seven blocks. Whether they were decrepit, desperate or cynical, or whether Columbus is so rich in attractive marriageable women that it makes no difference, the report did not say.

That David slew Goliath

To doubt that David slew Goliath would seem to those who would rather venerate than read their Bibles a straining to be incredulous. But if anyone with an elementary knowledge of the Bible's peculiar typography reads I Samuel xvii and II Samuel xvi, he will perceive that the wicked Goliath was slain three times, twice by David and once by Elhanan, a fellow townsman of David's. As a giant-killer, this Elhanan rivals the

redoubtable Jack; in I Chronicles xx, we find him killing Lahmi, Goliath's brother.

That apparently gave the King James translators a bright idea, because they went back and inserted "the brother of" before "Goliath" in II Samuel xxi 19, as the typography shows. That left David a giant and Elhanan a giant and "made sense," as we say; but, like so many other efforts to make sense out of obscure passages in the Bible, only at the cost of implying that the original writers didn't know what they were talking about or that the manuscripts in the state we have them are wholly unreliable. Both of which implications are so damaging that it would have been better to have endowed Goliath with a number of lives.

*That the Little Red Schoolhouse
gave a better education than the
more expensive schools of today*

That the little red schoolhouses did very well in rhetoric no one can doubt who has ever heard one of their graduates hold forth. But in other subjects their success has not been so apparent; some skeptics have even wondered if they did as well as the degenerate modern schools, with all their paraphernalia of laboratories and their nonsense of child study and educated teachers. In 1947, Mr. For-

rest Long, the editor of the *Clearing House*, was enabled to make something of a comparison when he found an old set of examination papers from 1846, in spelling and arithmetic, with a statement of the scores made. He sent them out to twenty schools, to be tried out on boys and girls of the equivalent grades. The modern youngsters did slightly better in spelling (which was one of the Little Red Schoolhouse's specialties) and almost twice as well in math.

*That many gifted men were
backward children*

It is apparently a comfort to many parents, viewing their progeny's report cards, to reflect that Herbert Spencer, Edison, Sir Walter Scott, Swift and many others who have since done all right, at least in the biographical dictionaries, were not very bright as children. But this is false comfort. These men were probably as superior as children as they were as adults. The chances are that some stupid teacher failed to see in them the conventional signs of promise, or was repelled by a manifestation of originality. Then, too, our knowledge of such underestimations usually comes from the distinguished person himself, who either pretends (like Rousseau) that he was more stupid than he really was (to show how much

better *he* has done with himself than the teacher ever did), or vengefully seeks to even some old score.

That Voltaire came to a very bad end

Despite Selden's warning in *Table Talk*, that to boast of converting a man on his deathbed is like boasting of the seduction of a woman when she is drunk, the unreflecting among the pious often triumphantly assert such claims. And where public avowal, witnesses, or other circumstances make the claim untenable, they are inclined to believe that the Sadducee at least got a foretaste of what was coming to him and departed this life in edifying agony.

Voltaire has been an especial thorn in godly flesh because of his religious accomplishments — his blessing and medallion from the Pope, his church and chaplain, his position as Temporal Father of the Order of Capuchins for the District of Gex, his doing his Easter Duty under the eye of a notary and his Declaration of Faith in his last days. But he so brazenly complied with all these technical demands and honors that to claim him as a convert would be a preposterous farce. Nothing was left for him, therefore, but the "edifying agony"; and that he has received with all its frights and appurtenances. Thousands of children

are taught that he died in an hysteria of fear and remorse, raving, insane, screaming with terror as the Devil came to get him — and, for reasons which are not made quite clear, regaling himself from time to time upon his own excrement.

Those who were present saw no indications of all this furor; happily, the fables were current early enough for them to leave, in refutation, a detailed account of his closing hours. His niece, the Marquise de Villette, who never left him for an instant, says that except for "a slight movement of exasperation" which was elicited from him by an intrusive parish-priest who was attempting to scoop a last-minute recantation, his whole demeanor "showed tranquillity, peace and resignation." She is confirmed by Dr. Burard, who was also present. Much has been made of an adverse report by his regular physician, Tronchin, by those who have not bothered to discover or scrupled to suppress the fact that Tronchin was not there, since he had withdrawn from the case earlier in a huff.

That "kidney trouble" is invariably accompanied by a pain in the back

Few patent medicines would repay their advertising if their use were restricted to any particular ailment. It

is only when they are recommended for general debility, "that 'run down' condition," "loss of virility," "acidosis," "black spots before the eyes" or other mythical or universal conditions that they pay off. Backache, like headache, is a symptom common enough and vague enough to lend itself to such exploitation; while the wording of the ads is usually carefully within the law, they do their best to suggest that a pain in the back is a certain indication of some disease of the kidneys. Sometimes it is, of course, and can be excruciating. But it is rare; nephritis does not as a rule produce backache. It is more likely to manifest itself in a chronic headache and puffy ankles.

*That chess is pre-eminently
"the" game of skill*

The brooding expressions assumed by chess players, the clouds of smoke and the abysses of silence into which they retire, the quaintness of the pieces and the strangeness of the terminology they employ have supported the opinion — which they industriously disseminate — that chess is a game requiring tremendous skill and intellectual capacity. It is easier to agree than to investigate, and few voices have been raised to challenge the assumption.

A sprinkling of heretics have always

maintained that despite the ease of its initial presentation chess is really a harder game, but they have been ignored with silent scorn. Professor John Neumann, a mathematician at the Institute for Advanced Study, has boldly asserted that chess is merely a game of chance, that "white," which has the first move, can always win, though he grants that if "black" is wily he can play a defensive game and may possibly achieve a tie.

That Nature maintains a "balance"

The "balance of nature" is a teleological illusion. It is true that whole animal communities act as a biological unit and secure the optimum populations for all, and it is true that man's interference has often produced catastrophic and unexpected consequences. But this is an indication of man's ignorance, not of Nature's "balance." Animal populations are unstable, as the vast number of extinct species mutely witness, and each species on its departure must have destroyed whatever balance existed. Environments, upon which the ecological community is absolutely dependent, are in a state of flux and nothing approaching the stability necessary for a balance of nature could be found outside of a laboratory.

That Negroes are "naturally happy"

If Negroes are naturally happy (sometimes "happy-go-lucky"), their happiness has some strange manifestations. Dr. Frederic Wertham, who maintains a charitable psychiatric clinic in Harlem, finds that Negroes are neurotic in the same proportion as whites. Dr. James L. Halliday finds that peptic ulcers are increasing among Negroes at more than three times the rate of increase in whites. Their infant mortality continues to be three times that of the rate among whites. Their life-insurance rates are from ten to twenty per cent higher than those for whites of the same age and occupation. This, the companies explain, is because they are subject to more diseases and live amid more violence and danger. Their "natural" happiness has, of course, a functional value to those who believe in it: if they are naturally happy, then those that are unhappy are, obviously, living an unnatural life in Harlem or Chicago and should not be encouraged.

That the Chinese esteem birds' nests as a delicacy

That the Chinese eat birds' nests has long been conclusive proof to the common occidental that orientals are

ludicrous, inscrutable and disgusting. In so far as any thought is given to the matter, the comestible in question is probably assumed to be something like a peculiarly unsavory and indigestible shredded wheat; whereas the nests eaten are actually composed of a sort of gelatin, exuded from special glands in the mouth of a certain genus of swift and refined of its impurities at great cost. Not many Chinese eat them, at that, because not many can afford them. We who regard the secretions of cows and bees as especially wholesome; who pay fabulous sums for the aborted eggs of sturgeon and the diseased livers of geese; who perfume our women with wax scraped from the genitalia of cats and the greasy spew of bilious whales, have so little margin of superiority that we have to make the most of what we can.

That savages are callous killers

The cartoonist usually represents the cannibal as eating his enemy with relish, and the Indian of boys' stories always takes a "fiendish" delight in murdering his captives. In reality the savage is far more remorseful about killing than the civilized man. Almost all savages are hedged in by heavy restrictions until they have atoned for the murders done in battle by long and severe penances.

HOW THE SOVIETS RAVAGED GERMAN ART

BY ELIZABETH FAGG

AMERICAN GI's in Germany tell a story about the typical Soviet soldier. Out of Russia for the first time, he was stationed in Berlin after the war's end. He had captured a German alarm clock. Excitedly, he carried his new possession to a Berlin watch repairman. Thumping it down before the astonished German, he commanded, "I want this clock cut up into four wrist-watches."

Official Soviet treatment of German art has more than resembled this soldier's way of treating a clock. In their removal of art treasures from Eastern Germany and Berlin, Russian soldiers destroyed through a kind of primitive dumbness just about as much as they carried off. Germany's wrecked museums today bear witness to Russian violence and inefficiency. From the moment Stalin's forces occupied Germany, they had made it clear that the USSR, unlike the other three occupying powers, regarded art treasures as legitimate booty of war. Soviet authorities immediately set up

in Berlin a fine arts outfit which was called — in absolute candor — "The Soviet Trophy Commission." Popularly dubbed "The Trophean," it went furiously to work living up to its name.

Within a year after the Russian entry, Eastern Germany and the Soviet sector of Berlin were stripped of artistic and cultural treasures. Immense quantities of renowned museum objects cherished by art lovers the world over — "Old Masters," tapestries, fine libraries, famous collections of statuary, coins and *objets d'art* of all kinds — were moving eastward, often in open boxcars, unwrapped and exposed to the rain. When ordered to remove a bas-relief from one museum, the Russians shaved the wall, harvesting only rubble and dust. They dragged a magnificent Egyptian relief of the Ancient Empire (2500 B.C.) down a stairway, bumping the soft, easily chipped limestone from step to step. A rare Chinese drum of the first century A.D. was likewise bounced

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