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Two Yardsticks of Morality

The mystery of life is not a problem to be solved. We were born some time ago, but know not why. We shall die some time, but know not when, where, and why. All we may ask: "What is it every man is seeking in his life? What does any man want?"

He is seeking to be secure in his life, to be left alone so that he may become what he would like to become. To be free and independent, to be happy, to do what he pleases without restraint and coercion, that's probably the most important single force in the world today.

Yet this force faces the reality of complete dependence of every individual on the cooperation of other individuals. Our food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and education are provided by other individuals working together in meticulous division of labor. We depend on our fellowmen for our very survival. How free and independent can we be with neighbors all around us and coworkers with us for most of the day?

This question of the limits of freedom has occupied theologians and philosophers throughout the ages. Some tell us that modern society cannot tolerate much individual freedom because of a limitation of space and resources; others demand a wide margin of freedom because of the

complexities and intricacies of man's cooperation and division of labor. One answer which is rather persuasive is based on the very definition of freedom itself. *If every man seeks to be secure, to be happy, to do what he pleases without restraint and coercion, and every man is to have the same measure of freedom, my own must be limited by everyone else's freedom as everyone else's is limited by mine.* I must always be mindful of others. I must not diminish anyone's freedom, I must not inflict harm on other people.

Most of us are considerate of the rights of our fellowmen. In our **personal** relations we try to be careful, thoughtful, courteous, and judicious. We may assist each other in many ways, and be Good Samaritans, offering aid to people in need; yet in our **political** lives we may act like thieves and highwaymen. We readily seize other people's income and property without remorse. Indeed, there seem to be two modes of behavior, two yardsticks of morality: one for our personal relations and one for the body politic.

Politics is strife of interests masquerading as contest of principles. To be a lawyer you must study law; to be a physician you must study medicine; to be a carpenter you must learn your trade; but to be a politician you need only to know your own interests and those of your electorate.

As voters we ourselves live by a similar yardstick of morality in our political choices and decisions. *We seize as many benefits and privileges as we possibly can — always at someone else's expense.* And we impose as many restraints and restrictions on our fellow citizens as we possibly can.

When death comes to our neighbor, we may weep with the widow and her children. We honor the dead and comfort the living. We deem it our special duty that, if they need our help, we give it to the utmost of our ability and our power. But as members of the body politic we dispatch our estate sleuths and collectors to seize most of their belongings. For many years we expropriated as much as 77 percent of their possessions through the Federal Internal Revenue Service; at the present we seize only 55 percent. We grab various percentages through our state revenue departments.

As members of a political party, professional association, or a labor union, we seek our own good at the whole world's expense. We act like hungry tigers in our own cause, preying on widows and orphans, women and children, and various minorities by majority vote. We plunge into politics to make our fortune. We join an association to fight for license and privilege, and sign up with a labor union in order to earn more and work less. In a labor dispute we may man a picket line and use brute force against fellow workers, employers, and their customers.

The difference between personal and political lives is clearly visible in the behavior of a teamster who, as a faithful member of his congregation, attends mass on Sunday and, as a member of local 1678, blocks traffic on Monday, throws bricks at passing trucks, and slashes the tires of scab automobiles. Similarly, the organized

steelworker, longshoreman, bus driver, or coal miner may attend church on Sunday but waylay independent workers on Monday. The hospital worker may care for the sick throughout most of the year but harm them at bargaining time.

In our personal lives we love our children. They are a mother's pride and a father's joy. We instruct them in virtue and labor and bind them to us through care and protection. Yet, as members of the body politic, we burden them with our debt, trillions of dollars, which we force them to pay or be dishonored in bankruptcy. We enjoy the productivity of the magnificent apparatus of production which our forebears left to us, yet it is insufficient for our enjoyment. Our deficits eat into the substance of the apparatus so that our children must work with less and subsist on less. We inflate and depreciate our currency, which erodes the purchasing power of all claims to money, including the savings of our children. As parents we may create a legacy for our children; as members of Medicare we drain it and fritter it away.

Indeed, there are two modes of behavior, two yardsticks of morality. In our personal lives we try to be charitable, which is to will and do what is just and right in every action. We may lend a hand to a stranger, stand by an orphan or widow, and give bread to the hungry. As members of the body politic we may act like a gang of highwaymen lurking in the highway for the purpose of robbing passers-by.



Hans F. Sennholz

You cannot correct all the evils of the world, nor relieve all the poverty in the world.
You cannot comfort all in distress, nor support all the underprivileged.
But you can stand by FEE which brings the light of freedom to the world.