


*The Saturday Review*

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## The Search for a Rule of Life

WHEN some developments in nineteenth-century science aroused the apprehensions of Charles Kingsley he communicated them to Thomas Henry Huxley and Huxley struck an attitude: "Sit down before fact as a little child . . . follow humbly and to whatever abyss nature leads or you will learn nothing."

Even today it would hardly do to reverse this injunction. We can't always refuse to face a fact before we know where it is going to lead or whether we want to go there. But so many abysses, physical and moral, have been opening since Huxley's time that we can't quite share his Victorian confidence and we might well add a *caveat* more often than we do: "Be quite sure that it really is a fact before you follow it too blindly and too far." Even science revises its facts from time to time, and sometimes it happens that we fall into an abyss between the time when a "fact" is announced and the time when it is discovered to be an error. Science is not so nearly infallible that the warnings of instinct can always be disregarded.

Just how blindly and just how far should we follow what, for instance, we can read as a fact in a textbook called "Psychology and Life"? This bulky work by a professor of psychology at the University of Southern California is described as "intended to meet the needs of students without sacrificing scientific rigor." Of its more than 600 pages little more than one is devoted to "morals," and here is the definition propounded: "Morality is the quality of behaving in the way that society approves. . . .

When a person obeys the rules and laws of his society we say that he is moral or good."

If this is a fact, then obviously "moral" and "immoral" have no meaning except in the context of a particular society, and it must be meaningless to say either that one society is morally better than another or, what is probably more important, that any individual is morally superior to the society in which he lives. Moral excellence is a phantom, because you cannot exceed the standard. In Nazi Germany, for instance, the torture and murder of Jews and of political opponents constituted "moral" conduct because it accorded with "the rules and laws" of that particular society. Any individual German who refused to take part in such activities was judged to be immoral by the other members of

his community, and therefore he *was* immoral according to our California professor.

IS THIS conclusion an inevitable consequence of a "scientific rigor" which we should follow "no matter to what abyss it may lead"? Or is it merely a reckless opinion to be distrusted just because it has already led Nazi Germany and other societies into what many men regard as a very black abyss indeed? The question is of considerable importance in view of the fact that what "Psychology and Life" states with unusual clarity is what has been widely taught by many sociologists and anthropologists as well as by psychologists, none of whom calls it "moral anarchy" (which is what it is) but "cultural and moral relativism" (which sounds not only innocuous but laudably broadminded and tolerant).

As an esoteric doctrine "cultural relativism" can well serve the purposes of the rulers of a totalitarian state raising up a generation of mass-men fanatically devoted to "ideals" which the rulers alone know to be neither good nor bad except in relation to secret power-aims. But what will the effect be in a democracy like our own, committed to popular education and to the widest possible dissemination of "the truth"? What line of conduct will a thoughtful man in possession of such a method follow? How will he order his own life in the light of such facts that "scientific rigor" compels him to accept? And to what abysses will he follow these facts?

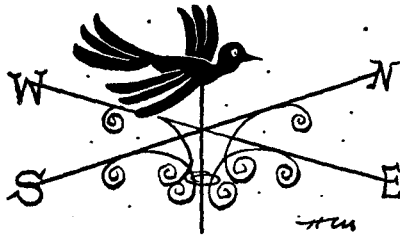
These questions I have recently been asking myself, and it seems to me that there are only two logical life-plans between which I could choose. The first and most obvious is a Machiavellian egotism. Since what is called "right" is merely the

## Text for Grandma Moses

By Ted Olson

ALL the clotheslines in America bannered  
 Alike on Monday morning, gospel-white.  
 The sentry American eagle might have blenched,  
 thinking the whole land was surrendering.  
 Not a bit of it. This was ritual.  
 This was sacrament and absolution.  
 Godliness had had its day. The next—  
 likewise proudly, likewise prayerfully—  
 was vowed to cleanliness.

I like to think  
 of America early on a Tuesday:  
 rinsed fresh, starched stiff, ironed shiny,  
 and only one day gone in sin.



law or the custom of my community I need have no concern with anything except what the community knows about. I will be careful to retain its good opinion while secretly taking advantage of every possible opportunity to violate law and custom with impunity. As Machiavelli said, the wise man will by no means always tell the truth but will take care to preserve his reputation for truth-telling because he can't take advantage of others unless they trust him. If, for example, you have a chance to take candy from a baby ask only how likely it is that you will be found out. Conscience will then become nothing but what Mr. Mencken once called it: "That still small voice which whispers 'Somebody may be looking'."

THE only other possible rule of life consistent with an acceptance of the supposed fact is less sensational but will also lead in the long run to consequences less than desirable. Should I be so timid or—by heredity or conditioning—so "group minded" that I cannot face even in the secrecy of my own heart the knowledge that I am violating the mores of my community then, for me, virtue will have to consist in the completest possible conformity to those dominant opinions which, for that community, define the meaning of "good." I can never aspire to be better than the average except insofar as I am better because I deviate less than most of my fellows from the norm. I can never hope to raise the standard of my society, because "raising the standard" is a meaningless phrase if the highest possible standard is, by definition, that generally accepted at the moment. Only an absolute conformist on the one hand and anarchistic individualist on the other can be said to "follow the facts."

Is there no *tertium quid*? I have searched without finding one. Any society which actually accepts and acts upon what "scientific rigor" is said to compel us to believe will presently be composed of a certain number of absolute conformists plus a certain number of unscrupulous "men of *virtu*." And there are, of course, those who say that it is precisely towards such a society that the Western world as well as the

world behind the Iron Curtain is tending.

If we have not quite got there yet it is because we have not yet followed Huxley's advice with resolute consistency. But we are on our way. As soon as enlightenment has overcome the effectiveness of residual prejudices, in favor of various traditional notions, we will get there. "Psychology and Life" says that philosophy and literature have long concerned themselves with morality but that only recently has science taken over. And it is no doubt because of literature that, for the present, most of us act sometimes as though we believed that "vice" is somehow recognizably a creature of hideous mien no matter how persistently custom or laws may describe it as divinely fair.

As Pope himself knew, his couplet is not always a safe guide. Vice does not always strike us as hideous because, so the next two lines warn us, the customs of a civilization do sometimes make us callously familiar with her face. But the abysses to which too confident a reliance on the moral instinct have led mankind are neither so numerous nor so deep as those towards which the moral anarchists (pardon me, the cultural relativists) invite us to plunge. And there is one striking cultural phenomenon they seem never to have noticed.

The most antithetical standards of value, can, they are fond of telling us, serve equally successful societies. One flourishing race may believe that taking human heads is the most laudable act that any man can perform. Another, like the American Hopis, may live by peace. Competition may be the very breath of life in one place and so frowned upon in another that any sort of personal distinction is almost a disgrace. As Lecky said, there is no possible line of conduct that has not been condemned as a sin at one time and place, enjoined as a virtue at some other. But there is at least one doctrine which no successful culture seems ever to have accepted. And that is cultural and moral relativism!

One and all, no matter how outlandish the ways of some may seem, if there is anything to be learned from anthropology it would appear to be that the only really deadly social philosophy is that which holds that one way is as good as another. At the present moment we are hardly more sure than we were a generation ago where to look for a valid "ought." But we are growing notably less sure that we can get along without one.

—J. W. K.

## Bookmarks

THE other morning we passed a young lady picket walking up and down in front of a retail establishment carrying a hortatory poster on a stick in her right hand and an open paperback book in her left. She read as she picketed. We about-faced and retraced our steps three times in the hope that we might report the title in this space, but the angle was bad and, as we didn't want to ask right out, we slunk away.

\* \* \*

In an enjoyable mystery novel by Geoffrey Holiday Hull called "The Watcher at the Door," the hero boards an Austrian train which is "almost overcrowded." Here is a word-pattern that deserves a special label, such as, perhaps, compensating reverse double-shuffle with decelerating backspin.

\* \* \*

Americans call it *broad jump* and the British *long jump*. The British, it seems to us, hold a slight edge of descriptive accuracy here. But the difference isn't earth-shaking—the thing's as broad as it is long.

\* \* \*

A young woman acquaintance of ours went into a beauty parlor the other day and emerged with ruly hair.

\* \* \*

A cudgel is taken up by H. J. Heltman of DeWitt, New York:

You recently noted the tendency of newsmen to use "presently" when they could just as well write "now." I should like to raise a question about a similar tendency of American writers, both newsmen and others, to use *an* before certain words beginning with *h* when they might just as easily, and more appropriately, use *a*. For English writers who almost universally omit their *h* when they speak the *an* reflects how their speech *sounds*. But for us who use the American dialects of English speech writing "an hundred," for example, is pure affectation.

\* \* \*

Problem for new acquirers of English: the distinction between a sitting duck and a setting duck.

\* \* \*

If christeners of superroads go so far as *thruway*, why not go the rest of the distance and make it *thruay*?

\* \* \*

Does an effort ever break if one bends it too far? —J. T. W.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## ANYWAY A PITCHER!

ERNESTINE EVANS's review of William Saroyan's "Mama I Love You" (SR June 2) was fine until her boner ending. Twink's dream was to pitch for the Giants, not the Yankees. You should extend apologies to Bill Rigney.

RUDY DUENZL.

New York, N. Y.

## MORE SALES, LOWER COSTS

THE BEST REPLY to Ronald Mansbridge's article "Books Are Hard Work" (SR June 2) lies in a visit to any bookstore in France. The French publishers have, by doing away with boards, cloth bindings, elaborately-illustrated jackets, and expensive book paper on all new books, reduced the price of their publications to less than half that of new American books—in an economy where the costs of most items beyond food and rent are roughly equivalent to those in the U. S. If the French can do it so can we—if our publishers have the guts and hard-headedness to make the change.

In France the idea is that the lowest possible price will increase the availability of books to those who like to read, that those who confronted with high prices in books may buy only one or two over a long period of time will buy as many as three or four in a single visit to a bookstore when the works on sale are geared to his pocketbook. To state this in American terms, if I could go to a store and find immediately after the reviews appeared Hersey's "A Single Pebble," Shaw's "The Happy Exiles," Severeid's "Small Sounds in the Night," and MacDonald's "The Ford Foundation" at \$1.00 or \$1.25 each (rough approximations of average French prices for new books) I would buy them all and feel my four or five dollars well spent. The only difference is that the publishers would get my money in the imagined instance, and that of thousands like me, rather than nothing at all as at present.

I am aware some publishers made a rather silly experiment along these lines a few years ago, but it failed because only a few titles were given this treatment. As a result the general book-buying public felt these must be poorer than the hard-bound volumes he saw surrounding them. To a certain extent he was justified—almost the only title of worth among all those so treated was Romain Gary's "The Company of Men."

No, the only way in which such a worthwhile change will ever be successfully accomplished is in its adoption by all major American publishers of popular new trade books at approximately the same time, and with their entire output of books (excepting a few special titles which, as in France, can also be offered in hard covers for collectors and libraries—new novels by authors with a built-in reputation whom the wise buyer knows in advance he wants on his shelves in cloth binding). Then when the publisher



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"Why don't we just nominate the Governor of New York—whoever he is—and go home?"

discovers that the sales of his previous typical hard-cover best-sellers double and treble at the reduced prices and increase his income many times over he will only be able to wonder why he didn't think of this years ago, and been able to keep his firm both solvent and respectable without having to stoop to Mickey Spillanes, Bridey Murphys, and Veliekovskis.

I would like to see some typical representative of the large trade publishers wrestle with his conscience and common sense in "explaining" why this departure from the present incompetent publishing practices in new books cannot be undertaken at once.

WILLIAM BLACKBEARD.

Los Angeles, Calif.

## EXIT MR. PILTDOWN

A VISIT TO THE anthropological room of the Museum of Natural History the other day presented an opportunity for a bit of speculation. In one of the exhibit cases was a group of plaster heads depicting the various stages in the descent of Man. In the upper-left corner of the case a relatively dust-free area suggested that one of the heads had recently been removed. This suspicion was reinforced by the fact that a certain part of the printed explanation alongside had been masked out with tape.

A phone call to the museum confirmed a personal belief that the missing head was that of Piltdown Man. With a rueful chuckle the voice at the other end explained that all references to the no longer mysterious Piltdown Man had been quietly and carefully disposed of!

JOSEPH SHAW.

New York, N. Y.

## POETRY AND VIOLINS

IN "EVERYBODY WRITES (Bad) Poetry," (SR May 5) John Ciardi wrote, "Ask John Doe whether or not he can play

the violin and he would not dream of answering, 'I don't know. I've never tried.' But ask him if he can write a poem and it will be a rare and saintly John Doe to whom it occurs that the poem requires at least as much technical devotion and at least as many years of practice as does the violin."

In Alexandra Tolstoy's "Tolstoy" we read: "Father often said that in order to write well one must *learn* how to write. He was indignant when he heard something like this: 'Have you written anything?' 'No, I've never tried yet.' He used to say: 'How absurd it would sound if to the question 'Do you play the violin?' you received the answer: 'No, I haven't tried.'"

This must be a traditional saying, for it wasn't new with Tolstoy either.

CAROLYN WILSON.

Peoria, Ill.

## WRITERS ARE HUMAN

FAULKNER'S REMARKS were irresponsible, and so was SR's recommendation of them. (July 7.) Perhaps he meant them as some kind of helpful hyperbole, but the idea that a writer may beg, borrow, or steal in order to live while he writes could make a heap of trouble if literally followed. It's true that Balzac's great industry was primarily prompted by the desire to keep clear of debtor's prison, and that plenty of modern writers produce in order to pay their alimony, but I'm sure most of us write better for being free of worries about imprisonment.

There is also the ghastly possibility that a man may neglect his important (though routine) social responsibilities and still not produce any "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Keats himself did his manful best, nursing a dying brother and at least partly dying for love—as well as developing his art. This would seem to be the best model.

MARGERY MANSFIELD.

Monterey, Mass.