

Scenic Route to a Dead End

***The Inevitable Americans*, by John Greenway (Knopf. 371 pp. \$5.95), argues that culture as an all-powerful determinant sets absolute limits to the possibilities of human action. Emile Capouya appears regularly in Saturday Review as the author of the column "The Real Thing."**

By EMILE CAPOUYA

THIS witty and amusing book requires only one thing of the reader—that he open the dikes of self-criticism and let the tide of comfortable prejudice flood gratefully over his soul. It means spiritual death by drowning, of course, but what price the strenuous life when suicide is delicious and easy? Mr. Greenway has a sharp tongue, and a fund of intelligent malice to expend against foreigners, reformers, and enthusiasts of all persuasions. That is most attractive, since we are none of those things. It is also pleasant to be counseled to relax and enjoy the infirm glory of the positive hour, *i.e.*, being top-dog Americans, atomic suzerains of a world in which most other people are hungry and miserable. No one can claim that this book is not entertaining. The author is an anthropologist, with a great fund of odd information, including many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse.

The Inevitable Americans has no formal structure, but it does present, *passim*, one serious philosophical contention: Whatever is, is right. Mr. Greenway agrees with Pope and Leibnitz on this most momentous of all questions—shall we, as a means of raising the level of American conversation, cultivate the divine discontent common to Christianity, The Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the commitment to democracy, or shall we let the machine and the corporation do the thinking for us, as they are perfectly qualified to do? In agreeing with Pope and Leibnitz, Mr. Greenway disagrees with the ideology of the American Revolution, the belief in human perfectibility, and the possibility of adding a cubit to our moral stature by taking thought.

Mr. Greenway's argument is that culture is an all-powerful determinant; we are what we are because our grandfathers were what they were; they chewed

tobacco and we chew gum. Culture sets absolute limits to the possibilities of human action, and the possibilities cover a very narrow range. As an argument, this one is nearly unbeatable. Nearly. For the narrow range of possibilities made available to a given human group by its culture can include living patterns that differ, to the educated eyes of the sufferers themselves, as do heaven and hell. Again, in the twentieth century mankind in general (like Mr. Greenway in particular) takes all knowledge as its province, is aware of hundreds of differing cultural patterns, seen laterally in the present and vertically in the past history of the race.

As an anthropologist, Mr. Greenway knows all about cross-cultural borrowings of artifacts and techniques. Does he imagine that ideals never cross a frontier? They do. That phenomenon, together with the fact that a culture like our own, drawn eclectically from many sources, offers alternative possibilities of development, lands us, alas, right back

in the human condition from which Mr. Greenway's engaging cynicism had for a moment freed us. The point is still the same. Shall we use our intelligence in trying to tame the inhuman world we have created, or shall we follow Pascal and sit still in a little room? The latter, Mr. Greenway says. But he is not convincing.

We are told that cynicism and sentimentality are close allied. Mr. Greenway's irreverence, tough-mindedness, and generally hard-boiled air appear to me to conceal superstition and fear. A superstitious reverence for the powerful spirit of this damnable age of mass-destruction, and fear of investing emotion and energy in what looks like the great lost cause of the human race.

So, while I read *The Inevitable Americans* with great amusement, enjoying Mr. Greenway's sly digs at my brothers, and savoring the harmless iconoclasm that subtly set me above the saints and heroes of the race, in the end it made me ill. At any given point the cheerful vulgarity of his view of life and love is tonic and bracing, but in the long run it is stupid and stupefying. I would hate to be as sure of anything as Mr. Greenway is of everything. And Plato is still in the right. If offered the choice between being happy hogs or sad philosophers, we must, however regretfully, leave the trough and rear up on our hind legs.

The Language Confuses

***Science: The Glorious Entertainment*, by Jacques Barzun (Harper & Row. 322 pp. \$6), deplores what science has been doing to our society. Isaac Asimov is associate professor of biochemistry at the Boston University School of Medicine.**

By ISAAC ASIMOV

THERE was a time when religion was the dominant force of Western civilization and the priesthood the highest social class. When laymen wrote criticisms of things-as-they-were, they found it safe to begin by expressing delight in and appreciation of the religious ideal. Only after that ritualistic disinfection could they apply their scalpel to religion-in-fact.

Now the dominant force is science, and the scientist is rising to the prestige once held by the priest. Jacques Barzun, as critic, begins by speaking highly of

the ideals of science and of its achievements. He comments favorably on the dedication and hard work of the scientist and of the usefulness of machinery (he carefully differentiates between science, the striving after pure understanding of the universe, and "techne," the building of machines). This done, he blasts away unsparingly at the manner in which the ideals of science have introduced the abstract, destroyed the subjective, depersonalized and degraded the individual, and reduced to nothingness the idea of meaning-in-life.

All this is voiced in limpid prose and with complete freedom from jargon so that one is fascinated and, at times, almost convinced.

Surely some of his complaints bear expression and reiteration in the most vigorous manner. Scientists *are* victimized by their own cant and neglect (to their great harm) the proper use of the tool we call the English language. Worse still, the social scientists, historians, economists, and psychologists—

indeed, even the nonscientist intellectuals of our science-ridden society—unable to duplicate the simply-ordered content of the physical sciences, nevertheless adopt their vernacular.

Art and literature also meet with Dr. Barzun's icy disapproval for having succumbed to mastery by science and for having abdicated their duty to preserve the personal, the concrete, the uncertain, and the intuitive against the cold abstraction, certainty, and reason of the scientific ideal.

Much of the author's criticism is constructive and as such should be welcomed by scientists. He is correct that some are devoting themselves to research for meretricious reasons (prestige, financial grants, power) and neglecting teaching as productive of none of these. Professor Barzun also points out that science consists of an indefinite number of groups and subgroups, which are as devoid of intercommunication as are the "scientist" and the "humanist" in C. P. Snow's thesis. This "specialism," as Mr. Barzun terms it, is a true danger, and nothing he can say in denunciation of it is too strong or can fail to do good.

However, Barzun also exhibits many of the faults he derides, among them the scientists' worship of certainty. Disapproving of Marx's views, he says that Marx fastened upon the public "the dogma that social improvement is a relatively simple thing requiring a complicated theory behind it; whereas it is *in fact* [italics mine] a terribly complicated thing which requires a relatively simple theory behind it." Mr. Barzun, you will note, is as sure as Marx. One is free to suspect that he is also just about as right.

A GAIN, Barzun is lyrical over the beauty of Nature and deplores the tendency of science to divorce man from it. Yet he brusquely dismisses as "nonsense" Bertrand Russell's lyrical view of the beauty of mathematics.

In denouncing the world of the machine, Barzun descends over and over to the merely petulant. The machine is not necessarily the overbearing, inexorable, unavoidable Master. It is far easier to go through a red light than past the flat palm of a large traffic policeman. It is far safer to kick the coin machine that does not deliver the bar of candy than to punch the cashier who does not give the correct change.

It is also less than awesome to include among the unbearable miseries of modern man the zip-code number or the increasing use of numbers in identifying and categorizing objects. There was a time when a man was called the equivalent of "Flying Eagle" or "Long Arrow" to indicate his wished-for attributes, or

"John of Lincoln" to show his dwelling place. Now that we call men by meaningless letter combinations I think that to complain about a further switch to meaningless number combinations is to indulge in an exercise of the trivial.

Granted that a machine society can

have its disadvantages, what is the alternative? Indeed, the author points out that previous ages have been no better, and that men unfairly compare the reality of the present to the ideal of the past. He does this grudgingly, however, and I don't think he means it.

SR's Checklist of the Week's New Books

Crime, Suspense

KILO FORTY. By Miles Tripp. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$3.50.

TREAD SOFTLY. By Frances Rickett. Simon & Schuster. \$3.50.

Current Affairs

FULL EMPLOYMENT OR STAGNATION? By J. M. Culbertson. McGraw-Hill. \$5.95.

THE POLITICS OF POPULATION. By William Peterson. Doubleday. \$4.95.

WITNESS FOR AID. By Frank M. Coffin. Houghton Mifflin. \$4.50.

Fiction

THE BARRACKS. By John McGahern. Macmillan. \$3.95.

BEHOLD GOLIATH. By Alfred Chester. Random House. \$4.95.

BRIGHTNESS. By Elizabeth Jenkins. Coward-McCann. \$3.95.

COMRADE DON CAMILLO. By Giovanni Guareschi. Farrar, Straus. \$3.95.

THE CROOKED CROSS. By Bredan Kennelly. Little, Brown. \$3.95.

THE FAR FACE OF THE MOON. By George Johnston. Morrow. \$4.50.

THE HUMANIZATION OF EDDIE CEMENT. By George Deaux. Simon & Schuster. \$4.95.

JAILER, MY JAILER. By Marian Gavin. Doubleday. \$4.95.

A KIND OF JUSTICE. By Edward Lindall. Morrow. \$3.95.

OLD HICKORY. By Noel Gerson. Doubleday. \$4.95.

RUSSIAN SCIENCE FICTION: Eleven Short Stories. Edited by Robert Magidoff. New York Univ. Press. \$5.

WHILE HE LIES SLEEPING. By Giro. Simon & Schuster. \$3.95.

History

BARREN VICTORIES: Versailles to Suez, The Failure of the Western Alliance 1918-1956. By Basil Collier. Doubleday. \$4.95.

A BIOGRAPHY OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES. By Broadus and Louise Pearson Mitchell. Oxford Univ. Press. \$6.75.

AN EPISODE IN ANTI-CATHOLICISM: The American Protective Association. By Donald L. Kinzer. Univ. of Washington Press. \$6.

A HISTORY OF VENEZUELA. By Guillermo Morón. Roy. \$6.95.

IDEOLOGY AND POWER IN THE AGE OF JACKSON. Edited by Edwin C. Rozwenc. New York Univ. Press. \$6.50.

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR. By A. J. P. Taylor. Putnam. \$6.95.

THE INDIAN AND THE WHITE MAN. Edited by Wilcomb E. Washburn. New York Univ. Press. \$7.50.

THE MEANING OF HISTORY. By Erich Kahler. Braziller. \$6.

QUEST FOR AMERICA, 1810-1824. Edited by Charles L. Sanford. New York Univ. Press. \$7.50.

QUISQUEYA: A History of the Dominican Republic. By Selden Rodman. Univ. of Washington Press. \$5.95.

THE STRATEGY OF VICTORY. By Victor Bonham-Carter. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$6.

Literary Criticism

AESTHETIC PAGANISM IN GERMAN LITERATURE: From Winckelmann to the Death of Goethe. By Henry Hatfield. Harvard Univ. Press. \$5.95.

STUDIES IN EUROPEAN REALISM. By Georg Lukacs. Grosset & Dunlap. Hardbound, \$4. Paperback, \$1.95.

Miscellany

PEOPLE OF EIGHT SEASONS: The Story of the Lapps. By Ernest Manker. Illustrations by Ake Gustavsson and Siw Englund. Viking. \$18.50.

Personal History

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, DOCTOR MELLI-FLUOUS. By Henri Daniel-Rops. Hawthorn. \$4.95.

DELIGHTS AND PREJUDICES. By James Beard. Atheneum. \$6.95.

THE DUPONTS OF DELAWARE. By William H. A. Carr. Dodd, Mead. \$6.95.

FOUR FLIGHTS UP. By Margalo Gillmore. Houghton Mifflin. \$3.75.

NO OTHER WAY. By Herbert L. Schrader. McKay. \$4.50.

Reference

DIRECTORY OF AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS II, 1964-65. Edited by Archie J. Bahm. Univ. of New Mexico. \$11.25.

WORDS INTO TYPE. New revised edition. Edited by Marjorie E. Skillin and Robert M. Gay. Appleton-Century-Crofts. \$7.50.

Religion

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH. Edited by Dow Kirkpatrick. Abingdon. \$3.

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN METHODISM. By the Editorial Board of Abingdon Press. Abingdon. Three volumes, \$27.50.

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM. By Frithjof Schuon. Roy. \$5.95.

Science

AMAZING WORLD OF INSECTS. By Arend T. Bandsma and Robin T. Brandt. Macmillan. \$9.95.

BLUEPRINT FOR LIFE: The Story of Modern Genetics. By Julius Fast. St. Martin's. \$5.

GEOLOGY. By William C. Putnam. Oxford Univ. Press. \$10.95.

THE MYSTERY OF THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE. By William Bonnor. Macmillan. \$7.50.

Sociology

PRISON. Edited by George Mikes. Horizon. \$4.95.

—Compiled by RUTH BROWN.