

The Decline and Fall...

of Practically Everybody

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Foreword

Deciding on a topic for a paper to be presented to an open meeting is always a special challenge. I thought at one point that I might just rename one of the papers I gave years ago. I figured I could get away with that, because most of those present are either too young to have been here when I gave it the first time...or too old to remember it. But I gave that idea up, because it is a cardinal rule of the Athenaeum Society that each member must have at least one original thought every two years.

Robert B. Sivley, Ph.D.

I had difficulty coming up with a proper title for this paper, but as I wrote, it became clear to me that it contained much criticism of present day cultural ideas, which is something that often happens to senior Athenaeum members when they reach a certain age. Finally, in a rare surge of intellectual honesty, I decided to give the paper the only title that fits its content. I call it “The Decline and Fall of Practically Everybody.”

IT BEGAN AS A REVIEW of a book, which I thought might have been read by only a few, if any of those present, since I have asked many people about the book, but have never found another individual who has read it, and I cannot explain why I have.

But the book to which I refer is the 1872 Samuel Butler work called Erewhon, (which, incidentally, is “nowhere” spelled backward). This book is not one that could be called an “easy read,” and it would never make today’s best seller list. Neither Oprah nor the New York Times would be interested. But it is one of many books written in the *Utopian genre*, which refers to literary works that attempt to describe ideal societies or to set forth predictions of what an ideal society might be like. Many have placed the story of the Garden of Eden in this category, and Sir Thomas More’s 16th century book, Utopia, actually gave the genre its name. Often, however, an author’s view of an ideal society would not suit many of us, considering such works as Aldous Huxley’s scientifically sophisticated Brave New World, or George Orwell’s politically nightmarish 1984, or B.F. Skinner’s Walden II, which describes what the world might be like if run by psychologists, and I doubt that any of you would welcome that prospect.

THE EREWHON STORY is actually an anti-utopia story in which a 19th century Englishman wanders into a wilderness where he comes upon an isolated civilization, quite different from that with which he is familiar, and with many customs just the reverse of those of civilized, western people. Butler’s book is considered to be a criticism of socialism, the theory of evolution, and mankind’s increasing dependence on machinery, which is interesting in view of the fact that it was written in the 19th century. He reasons that while mankind has been evolving for millions of years, technology is of much more recent origin, so if it continues to develop at its current pace, then machines may eventually develop consciousness and be the dominant force in the world. Just consider the fact that he wrote this some 200 years before computers and the digital revolution.

But I found the most interesting part of the story to be his description of that people's peculiar views on health and morality. In the kingdom of Erewhon, for example, it was a punishable offense to be physically ill, while criminality was looked upon kindly as a treatable disorder, and health and physical beauty were the most admired qualities. So in Erewhon, the rule was that the sick must be punished, the criminal must be taken care of, and the beautiful people are to be admired.

NOW WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE I would find this peculiar pattern of thought to be of interest? Simply because it strikes me that today we might be moving toward a similar point of view as to how we should deal with sickness and immoral behavior. For example, listen to a defense attorney's plea that a person charged with assault with intent to rob was actually driven by low self esteem and should be excused. Or, on the other hand, observe very sick people sitting for three or four hours in an emergency room, and you just might begin to wonder whom we wish to punish and whom we wish to care for.

ONCE UPON A TIME preachers talked about sin, and doctors concerned themselves with sickness, and there was general agreement on a number of concepts. Certain things were considered to be morally wrong, and could, therefore, be called sins and dealt with as such. The way to handle sin was to repent, change your bad habits, and try to develop better moral character.

Preachers tried to help you overcome the more serious sins, which included such things as gambling, excessive alcohol use, any use of other dope, wife beating, neglecting your children, stealing (in its various forms), and sexual misbehavior (in all of its forms). There were some debatable issues, but all of the above were widely accepted as sins, which all people should shun.

IN THOSE DAYS medical professionals paid little attention to what we called sins, leaving it to the ministers to treat the soul, while they concentrated on the diseases of the body. They treated patients who had cancer, heart disease, or even obesity with the same objectivity, always looking for causes, proper diagnoses, and effective treatments. They never judged the individual as though he or she had any responsibility for the illness treated.

But the situation has changed! Sometime ago the concepts of sin and sickness began to blur and to shift from one condition to another, so that

today we often have trouble determining which is which. I think it happened about the time we got health insurance and started thinking about government financed medical services – which was about the same time that psychologists and lawyers began to refer to behaviors previously called sins as various types of illness.

THUS TODAY WE have many preachers talking about sickness and many doctors talking about sin (though usually with more sophisticated scientific or theological terminology). The result is that there is some confusion as to who is a sinner and who is a patient (i.e. who should be treated and who should be punished), and, to some extent, the roles are reversed – something we might call the “Erewhon Phenomenon.”

In one instance, in the Erewhon story, a person found guilty of embezzling a large sum of money was not punished for his behavior but was given sympathy and sent to someone called a “straightener” for weekly treatments. Physical illness in Erewhon was seen differently. For example, a citizen found to have a pulmonary disorder, was charged as a criminal and was about to be sent to prison, when his attorney came up with the defense that his client was only pretending to be sick in order to defraud his insurance company, and that defense got him more sympathy from the court than had his illness.

AND HOW HAS THIS point of view arisen in our own society? Today health experts tell us that most of our physical problems are our own fault – the results of our excesses and of our failures to meet our responsibilities. Most of our illnesses are said to be due to our having either eaten too much, exercised too little, exercised too much, selected our foods unwisely, used tobacco, used alcohol too much, used alcohol not enough, failed to fasten our seat belts, or practiced unsafe sex. In short, they are sins.

Being stricken with disease used to be considered bad luck. That was when most people died of infectious diseases like TB, diphtheria, or typhoid. The leading causes of death now are heart disease, cancer, and cerebrovascular and pulmonary disorders – conditions that used to be called *normal diseases of old age* but now often referred to as *lifestyle diseases*, because they are caused or aggravated by consumer choices.

The fifth leading cause of death is accidents and another well known cause is AIDS, and those are even more obviously consumer related. Most accidents

would not happen if people were more careful, and there would be fewer traffic deaths if people would wear seat belts, not drive so fast, and drive only when sober. And I don't have to tell you how to prevent the other problem, because you already know.

STUDIES EVEN SHOW that there are correlations between the incidence of the dreaded Alzheimer's disorder and lifestyles. Getting more education, avoiding head injuries and staying physically and mentally active in late life are found to be positive factors in avoiding Alzheimer's. Thus one is urged to accept responsibility, to recognize that it is our duty to engage in physical as well as intellectually stimulating activities as opposed to doing nothing but riding around in golf carts and watching sitcoms.

So if you get sick today, it may be said to be your own fault. You ate too much, you drank too much, you smoked, you put too much butter on your toast, or you slept with the wrong person. We are reminded every day that we should be doing aerobics, avoiding fats, buckling our seat belts, and checking our blood pressure. Otherwise, we are guilty, and we dread going in for an annual physical, and having to mount the scales and suffer the embarrassment of another weight increase, even if the doctor frowning at us is a little overweight himself !

So sickness is coming to be seen as a punishable offense, and society has devised some penalties. The offender must spend long hours in waiting rooms, pay huge amounts of money for services, and be regarded with scorn by those who feel that they must bear the burden imposed by those who allow themselves to get sick. Indeed, I think that national health insurance would have passed already, were it not for the fact that when the average citizen looks at an overweight derelict who appears able to work, if not addicted to drugs or alcohol, and imagines what it might cost to provide health care for that individual, he knows that he is opposed to such a program.

BUT WHAT ABOUT the other side of the coin – the view that those who commit criminal offenses should be handled with sympathy? Many programs have been devised to interpret certain antisocial behaviors as bad habits for which understanding and treatment are called for.

Now I believe that Alcoholics Anonymous is a wonderful organization that helps people to recognize their own problems and to do what is necessary to

rehabilitate themselves. Alcohol addiction has been recognized as a disease for many years. And the 12-step program, established in 1935, has no doubt helped more individuals to overcome their addictive disorders than any form of medical or psychological treatment.

But....since then many other programs have borrowed that model to help people overcome behavioral disorders, many of which have no known medical or chemical basis. They include such problem behaviors as gambling, overeating, losing one's temper, child abuse, something called sexual addiction, and even computer addiction. One computer hacker, who disrupted a large company's files was sentenced to treatment for "computer addiction" – a typical application of the Erewhon philosophy !

YOU HEAR OF SUCH diagnoses as compulsive rapist, compulsive gambling, or "telephone scatologia" (that's telephone addiction – you may see examples of it every day if you stroll through a local grocery store or drive down Fort Campbell Boulevard). These are little more than ways of classifying some obviously aberrant behavior that the individual is said to be unable to control. But when is a behavior uncontrollable? Exactly what is a *compulsive rapist*? That's like trying to determine whether there is such a thing as an object that is immovable or a force that is irresistible.

There is a huge, logical leap from the term "rapist" to the term "compulsive rapist." With the first you have one victim and one perpetrator, but when you add "compulsive" to the term rapist, you have two victims. And what does society do when the perpetrator must be seen as a victim? Should he then be punished, given treatment, or both?

Many other dilemmas are posed when this approach is taken. What should be done to a certain college president who was arrested for making obscene telephone calls and explained that he had become addicted to such behavior and was in need of treatment? Or what should be done to the burglar who broke into six homes, stealing money and jewelry, who was found guilty but not criminally responsible, because he was on anabolic steroids which he was taking to improve his weight lifting ability.

The *New Yorker* magazine published an article last year describing the research by a group of neuropsychologists, who hope to show that there is a basic brain malfunction identifiable in people who are diagnosed as

having an *antisocial personality disorder*, which is described in the diagnostic manual as applying to people who tend to be deceitful, irresponsible and reckless and tend to engage in such behaviors as theft, violence, and racketeering. The group hopes to find a treatment for such people, heretofore avoided by most therapists as untreatable.

When a researcher was asked how they could evaluate whether the treatment was effective, he replied that he guessed they would just have to observe what happened when the individual returned to community living. You may agree that we are fortunate not to be the community in which that research project is being conducted.

Now, lest you think I am being too judgmental, I can appreciate those who recognize that people are human and make mistakes. The puritanical society of Hawthorne's, The Scarlet Letter was excessively punitive and harsh, lacking common decency and understanding. I do not agree, however, with the attitude of one, Professor Harold Hill, who, in the play The Music Man, sings "I hope and pray for Hester to win just one more A!"

ALL THIS LEADS ME TO CONCLUDE THAT a question arises with regard to the "disease model," when it is applied to every bad habit imaginable. And the problem with all this is that you cannot run a society or cope with its problems, if people are not held accountable for what they do.

Like the convoluted society of Erewhon, we may be on the verge of establishing something worse than a license to steal – we may be setting a series of legal precedents that will make it virtually impossible to hold anyone responsible for anything, except, of course, eating too much red meat or not fastening their seat belts !