5

Over-generalizing

Fallacy Number One

One swallow[1] does not make a summer, nor can two or three cases often support a dependable generalization. Yet all of us, including the most polished eggheads, are constantly falling into this mental mantrap. It is the commonest, probably the most seductive, and potentially the most dangerous, of all the fallacies.

You drive through a town and see a drunken man on the sidewalk. A few blocks further on you see another. You turn to your companion: "Nothing but drunks in this town!" Soon you are out in the country, bowling along at fifty. A car passes you as if you were parked. On a curve a second whizzes by. Your companion turns to you: "All drivers in this state are crazy!" Two thumping generalizations, each built on two cases. If we stop to think, we usually recognize the exaggeration and the unfairness of such generalizations. Trouble comes when we do not stop to think — or when we build them on a prejudice.

This kind of reasoning has been around for a long time. Aristotle was aware of its dangers and called it "reasoning by example," meaning too few examples. What it boils down to is failing to count your swallows before announcing that summer is here. Driving from my home to New Haven the other day,

[1] William Tell's note: the bird — as in the song, "When the Swallows Return to Capistrano."

a distance of about forty miles, I caught myself saying: "Every time I look around I see a new ranch-style house going up." So on the return trip I counted them; there were exactly five under construction. And how many times had I "looked around"? I suppose I had glanced to right and left — as one must at side roads and so forth in driving — several hundred times.

In this fallacy we do not make the error, developed in Chapter 4, of neglecting facts altogether and rushing immediately to the level of opinion. We start at the fact level properly enough, but *we do not stay there*. A case or two and up we go to a rousing over-simplification about drunks, speeders, ranch-style houses — or, more seriously, about foreigners, Negroes, labor leaders, teen-agers.

Over-generalizing takes many forms. It crops out in personal thinking and conversations as above. It is indispensable to those who compose epigrams and wisecracks, and most critics and reviewers find it very handy. It is standard for columnists and commentators who try to compress the complicated news stories of the day "into a nutshell." Newspaper headlines are a continuing exhibit of over-generalizing, but more from typographical necessity than deliberate intent. Cartoonists are under continual temptation. Those persons who go about scenting plots and conspiracies in the most innocent happenings are confirmed addicts, and so are those who follow esoteric cults of all varieties.

STRAW MEN

One vigorous branch is the creation of straw men to represent a class. You take a few stray characteristics, build a dummy around them, and then briskly demolish it. Here, for instance, is a debate between Russell Kirk and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., on "Conservative vs. Liberal."[2] Mr. Kirk leads off with a picture of a "liberal" which would hardly fit Mr. Schlesinger:

[2] *New York Times* Magazine, March 4, 1956.

> The liberal, old style or new style, swears by the evangels of Progress; he thinks of society as a machine for attaining material aggrandizement, and of happiness as the gratification of mundane desires.

Mr. Schlesinger rejoins by creating a highly stylized "conservative":

> The conservative, on balance, opposes efforts at purposeful change because he believes that things are about as good as they can reasonably be expected to be, and that any change is more likely than not to be for the worse.

This judgment Mr. Kirk specifically rejects when he says: "The intelligent conservative does not set his face against all reform. Prudent social change is the means for renewing a society's vitality. . . ." The boys have a zestful time, however, laying about them with wooden swords.

Much of the quarreling between rival ideologies takes this general form. The socialist erects a horrid verbal image of a bloated capitalist and knocks it over with a bang, while the rugged individualist gleefully annihilates a stuffed and bearded figure which has practically nothing in common with, say, Mr. Norman Thomas.

Another form, common among strong-minded characters, is to generalize that what is good for oneself is good for everybody. My father, for instance, liked his soup excessively hot, and was positive that everybody followed his taste. He was severe with cooks who did not serve liquids at scalding temperature, and refused to believe that plenty of us lacked his copper lining. Whatever holiday he planned was sure, he thought, to be extravagantly enjoyed by the rest of the family — or indeed by any family — and he brushed aside as incomprehensible all alternate suggestions.

Finally, there are the prophets and predictors who use the thin-entering-wedge argument, known in scientific circles as

extrapolation. You take a case or two, propound a universal pattern therefrom, and project the curve into the future. The next chapter will be devoted to this fallacy.

OUR OLD CAT AND ANOTHER ONE

When I was about ten my grandfather once caught me indulging in a high, wide, and handsome generalization. He proceeded to tell me the story of our old cat, a story I have never forgotten.

A boy says: "Gee, there were a million cats in our back yard last night!"

"Did you count them?" asks his mother.

"No, but the place was full of cats."

"How many did you actually see?"

"Well, er, there was our old cat and another one."

My grandfather may not have cured me but he slowed me down.

A good deal of over-generalizing is harmless small talk. One weekend it rains, and the next weekend it rains again. So the suburban golf-players and gardeners assure each other that it "always rains on weekends."

It is only a step, however, to something much more dangerous. In Arizona I met a woman who said, "I've had to let Maria go, and I'll never hire another Mexican. You can't trust any of them, not one!" I tried to reason with her but she was too angry to listen. She was building up, you see, a formidable case of race prejudice based on one or two examples. Because a certain Mexican maid had disappointed her, she was condemning all Mexicans in one sweeping conclusion.

How much of the prejudice against Negroes, Yankees, Jews, Japanese, Britishers, Puerto Ricans, is similarly built up? One or two unfortunate experiences are developed into an ironclad rule rejecting a whole race, culture, or religious group. To make

it worse, the rejector himself is often to blame for the unfortunate experiences through his failure to understand people of a different culture. How much of the conflict and misery and persecution in the world today arises from this kind of over-generalizing?

Here is Mr. Smith, of Middletown, Nebraska, who spends three days in Greece on a package tour. On his return, he gives a talk at the Thursday Club to tell his friends all about Greece. The modern Greeks, he says, are a very backward people — they have no decent traffic lights, they spend all day drinking coffee in sidewalk cafés, and don't properly repair the Parthenon. Meanwhile, Mr. Parnassos of Athens spends three days in Chicago on a package tour and returns to inform his friends in the sidewalk café that Americans spend their time killing each other with sawed-off shotguns when they are not being annihilated on the highways.

"When I am told," said Dean Acheson, "that Americans are idealistic, or that Frenchmen are logical, or Germans emotionally unstable, or Asians inscrutable, I always listen to the ensuing observation with skepticism. Not that such generalizations may not have some basis in fact, but they can rarely carry the superstructure erected on them."[3] After Pearl Harbor, the superstructure erected by Americans to describe the Japanese people was largely unprintable, with "little yellow monkeys" among the milder epithets. Today, the superstructure has shifted back approximately to where it was before the war. The Japanese people probably have not changed much, but American generalizations about them have undergone two violent shifts in a dozen years.

Chester Bowles in *Ambassador's Report* observes that after three months in India it would have been easy to write the book, for he had learned all the pat answers by that time.

[3] In *Harper's Magazine*, November, 1955.

After eighteen months is was much harder, for by then he knew that most of the pat answers were wrong. The longer he stayed, the more complicated India became. Messrs. Cohn and Schine, lieutenants of Senator McCarthy, were bothered by no such problem when they breezed through Europe in a few days, uncovering Communist conspiracies or evidence of "disloyalty" in various cities.

I KNOW A MAN WHO

Here is a group dissecting social security after dinner. Mr. A says: "I know a man who had eighteen thousand dollars in currency under his mattress, yet he went right ahead drawing benefits. That's social security for you!" A brisk battle then takes place on free enterprise versus the welfare state, with each contestant generalizing from a few hand-picked cases. "Would you hand the manufacture of atomic bombs over to Wall Street?" is countered by: "Would you hand the steel industry over to those bureaucrats in Washington?" Actually, of course, the U.S. Government must control certain activities in the public interest, such as atomic energy, while others are much better handled by private business. A meaningful discussion would attempt to find out where the line should be drawn.

At another dinner party I heard a woman say: "I had to take Leonard out of high school. Public schools are just impossible!" A man snaps back: "I'll never let John leave our high school. Private schools make children snobbish and they have no place in a democracy." Off they go for twenty minutes, while your author, sitting between the gunplay, has no chance to point out that it depends on the boy, the school, the teachers, the community, and quite a number of other things.

A politician in Rhode Island denounces compulsory auto-

mobile insurance. "It hasn't worked in Massachusetts," he thunders, "and it'll never work anywhere!"

At a public hearing in our town on two-acre zoning, a citizen arose and said he had heard that an acre of land had just been sold for two thousand dollars. "Now if this regulation goes through, and a young couple wants to build a house here, they will have to pay four thousand dollars for their land, and they simply can't afford it. What kind of democracy do you call that?" He sits down amid loud applause from the opposition. But there is still land in town to be had for two hundred dollars an acre. So an equally logical case could be made for a young couple starting life on a plot costing only four hundred dollars. Neither figure, of course, makes sense, for they are at the extreme ends of the cost spectrum. The real issue is a land cost somewhere in the middle, and, far more important for the young people's budget, the ratio of the land cost to the cost of the house.

Over the radio comes a news story of an escaped convict holding up a man and his wife in their home. He gets in the door on the plea that his car has broken down and he needs help. "That just goes to show," says a radio listener, "you don't dare help anyone in trouble any more!" If the whole community subscribed to this generalization, nobody would trust anybody, nobody would help anybody, and society would dissolve into anarchy. (Yes, this is a thumping generalization, too, but I believe that the assumption warrants the deduction.)

"Are you going to buy some of that new Ford stock, Mrs. Rowe?"

"No, I wouldn't touch it. Stocks are too risky!"

"What makes you think that?"

"Richard and I got caught in that Radio Common. It went down and down. It taught us a lesson, I can tell you!"

A valuable lesson, no doubt, but hardly enough to warrant avoiding the market all one's life. *What stocks, when, under what conditions, and recommended by whom?* Careful answers to these questions have returned some investors to the market after the debacle of the 1930's, to their considerable advantage.

IN A NUTSHELL

Headline writers are forced to over-simplify ideas as well as pick the shortest words. WORST DEFEAT SINCE CHINA turns out to be a gain by Communists in the Indonesian elections. Many of us are pretty well conditioned to discount the headlines. Before making up our minds we read the news story under them. In this case the story says that the Indonesian elections might, under certain circumstances, some day, prove to be a serious defeat for the West. People who read only headlines must receive a fantastically twisted picture of the current world.

The distortion is made worse by the readers' appetite for violence and conflict. An ugly strike is always news, but a peaceful settlement is something for the bottom of page 42. Newspaper readers, if they believe what is printed, tend to generalize a society abounding in murderers, kidnapers, rapists, abortionists, stick-ups, arson, riots, and car crashes.

It is a pleasure to announce, accordingly, that nine radio and television stations in Chicago have agreed on a joint program for reporting race disturbances in the lowest possible key, without inflammatory statements.[4] These stations promise not to use superlatives or adjectives which might "incite or encourage a conflict." They will avoid the use of the word "riot" until the trouble has become serious enough to warrant it. They will carefully verify first reports and get the true facts

[4] *New York Times*, September 24, 1955.

before breaking a story. "Stories must be written in calm, matter-of-fact sentences, and in such a tone that they will not be inflammatory."

Commentators and columnists who daily interpret the news are under almost as much compulsion as headline writers. When trouble broke out in the Formosa Straits in 1954, its causes were very far from simple. Not only the two Chinas and the U.S. were involved, but Russia, Japan, Britain, France, India, and indeed all of Asia. But at 7 P.M., Eastern Standard Time, Walter Newcomb,[5] the globe-trotting expert, is forced to say: "Let's get this Formosa business down to brass tacks" – and does so in ninety seconds flat. Marquand gives us a commentary on some commentators as they operated in World War II:

> Well, there you had it in a nutshell, or in a thumbnail sketch, if you want to put it that way. . . . The main thing was to remember that Hitler's timetable has been upset, and time was of the essence of gangster nations. . . . Jeffry knew that the picture which Walter gave of the war and soldiers was distorted. It was not fair to select such simplicity to illustrate something which was immense and tragic. . . . It would have been better if people like Walter would stay at home where they belonged instead of trying to round out pictures in a nutshell.

As an occasional writer for popular magazines I am aware of this nutshell trouble. Editors prefer a package neatly wrapped, with no ifs, ands, or buts. Qualifications slow the story and annoy readers, who want clean-cut dramatic unity and easy answers. But one cannot write honestly about modern political or social questions – say, the farm problem – without considerable qualification. Simplification can easily turn into distortion. Better not to write the article at all.

[5] Borrowing the name of a character in *So Little Time*, by John P. Marquand.

SOMEBODY ALWAYS GETS HURT

Arguments about a proposed law – a new tariff act, for instance – are nearly always corrupted by over-generalizing. Any major enactment is bound to hurt somebody, and the real issue is to strike a balance between gains and losses. Lower tariffs may hurt the wool business, but does the consumer gain enough to compensate? Such accounting takes time and thought. How much simpler for the wool manufacturers to cry havoc, the nation is ruined; and for importers of woolens to cry that prosperity will now advance to new peaks! What's good for General Motors may or may not be good for the country; the CIO[6] publicity department is smarter with their slogan that what's good for the country is good for the CIO – but this might not always follow either.

Questions like these require thought and analysis, and many of them turn out like the story of the man who went down the street smashing windows. He said it was "good for trade." It might be good for the glass trade, but not for the store-keepers, while the waste made the whole community poorer.

IN SUMMARY

Why do we over-generalize so often and sometimes so disastrously? One reason is that the human mind is a generalizing machine. We would not be men without this power. The old academic crack: "All generalizations are false, including this one," is only a play on words. We *must* generalize to communicate and to live. But we should beware of beating the gun; of not waiting until enough facts are in to say something useful. Meanwhile it is a plain waste of time to listen to arguments based on a few hand-picked examples.

The generalizations we make are built up from cases the way a house is built out of stones, bricks, and lumber. If

[6] William Tell's note: the Congress of Industrial Organizations, one of the predecessors of today's AFL/CIO.

we see masons fitting large stones into a foundation, we are not likely to say: "This is going to be a stone house." If we see bricklayers starting a chimney we will hardly generalize: "This will be a brick house." In watching such physical operations, we have learned to wait until enough material is in place to warrant a reasonable inference about the kind of house it is going to be.

Chester Bowles did this about India. He waited until a great many facts were in place before telling us about that complicated country. But Chester Bowles, like the rest of us, if not on guard, could doubtless make two cats into a world of cats; two drunks into a reeling town, one swallow into a summer.

Generalizing is at the head of the reasoning process, and appears in many homely practices. Comparing, classifying, sorting, making bundles of similar objects and ideas, take up a substantial part of every normal person's day. The learning of children is largely generalizing – about doors, cars, dogs, slippery sidewalks; about spelling, arithmetic, and table manners. We also start new generalizations when we begin a collection of any kind – hi-fi records, stamps, autographs, prints. Much of this book is an exercise in generalizing about logical fallacies.

Generalizing is indeed central in the study of logic and the syllogism. Say the Liebers:[7]

> A proposition may be *universal* (if it applies to all members of a class, like "All metals are elements"), or it may be *particular* (if it applies only to *some* members of a class, like "Some men are untrustworthy.").

A person well grounded in logic is likely to be pretty shy of over-generalizing.

The story runs that a foreman took an intensive course

[7] *Mits, Wits and Logic.*

in human relations given by one of the universities and paid for by his company. It included careful fact finding and delayed decisions. "What are we going to do for exercise," he demanded, "now that we've stopped jumping to conclusions?"

In serious discussion and problem solving, I am afraid we shall have to give up that particular form of exercise, exhilarating as it may be. George Eliot phrases it well in *Middlemarch*: "This power of generalizing, which gives man so much the superiority in mistake over dumb animals."