

*Black or White**Fallacy Number Twelve*

THE MODERATOR of a famous radio debate program used to hold up a ball and ask the studio audience what color it was. When they answered “white,” he would turn the ball around and ask again. “Black,” they would say. Then he would point the moral; every question has two sides and we should listen to both. But, as Mr. Leo Cherne objects in a discussion of radio debates, the big issues today are not longer merely black or white, if indeed they ever were.¹ They have many sides, not just two sides, and we must allow for shades of gray.

Classical logicians, like debaters, tend to take the absolute position, impatient of in-between relationships. They like things open or shut, true or false, good or bad, right or wrong. This must give them the mental satisfaction of a tidy paper solution, but it does not help them understand their world. Whenever we force a problem which contains shades of gray into an unyielding pattern of black and white, we distort the solution and hamper our own understanding.

John and Mary are being divorced. Their friends line up on two hostile camps. One group declares that it is all *his* fault, the other that it is *her* fault. Quite possibly the fault lies with neither. Forces beyond the control of John and Mary may be causing them to separate. Their education or habits or religion may be sharply antagonistic. They may even possess

¹ *New York Times Magazine*, March 2, 1952.

incompatible blood types which prevent them from having children. For most broken marriages there is a process involved, a spiral of many causes. It is unreasonable to insist on a rigid one-cause-and-effect interpretation, with somebody exclusively to blame.

“Women are bad drivers!” says Mr. Roe, contemplating another bill for a crumpled fender. “You’re wrong,” cries his friend Doe, “women are good drivers, better than men!” And off they go, hammer and tongs. What are the facts? Records of accidents indicate that in some respects worse, and two-valued reasoning over-simplifies the question. Women disorganize more fenders and bumpers, but have fewer crashes involving personal injury. Supporting evidence is found in lower insurance rates for women in some states.

MANY SITUATIONS ARE TWO-VALUED

In the early spring of 1955 I heard a man say: “It’s either the Yankees or the Red Sox in the American League”—thereby shrinking an eight-valued question into two, before a ball had been pitched. But when in late September the pennants were clinched in both major leagues, a real two-valued choice appeared: Either the New York Yankees or the Brooklyn Dodgers would win the World Series. Plenty of pertinent discussion was in order, and the opportunity, as I remember it, was not neglected.

Many factual situations are legitimately two-valued. The electric current is either on or off, as every householder knows. When the trigger is pulled, the gun goes off or it doesn’t. The car won’t run or it will —though sometimes in fits and starts. The lady who said she was “only a little bit pregnant” had no case. Our task is to determine which situations are really two-valued, and which are multi-valued.

A major reason for black-or-white thinking is the structure of the English language, indeed, linguists say, of all the Indo-European languages, including Sanscrit, Greek, and Latin, as well as modern European tongues. Children speaking these languages are brought up to think in *opposites*—little vs. big, long vs. short, clean vs. dirty, hero vs. villain, love vs. hate, good vs. bad, life vs. death. It takes a real effort to break out of this linguistic conditioning.

Other languages do not have this hard and fast dichotomy, so that for their speakers the multi-valued approach is easier. A Chinese, for instance, says: “This long and the short are mutually related”; “the hard and the easy are mutually complementary”; “the front and the rear mutually accompany each other.”² It is possible that the Marxists are going to have a lot of trouble forcing the two-valued notion of a choice between Capitalism or Communism on the Chinese rank and file. Russians accept it readily, as Russian is an Indo-European language.

Not only our language but our habits make Americans think this way. Living under pressure we feel that we must decide things fast. “Make up your mind, Mac!” We skip lightly to inferences and value judgments in order to come to the point of action—where indeed the situation may be a yes-or-no choice, often an irrevocable one, as in pulling a trigger. For many Americans it seems easier to act than to think, and when we do think, we like to make it fast. Our comic books and TV dramas feed our appetite for rapid action.

John Steinbeck, writing in the *Reporter*, described how his young son, Catbird, learned to tell the Good Guys from the Bad Guys in TV horse opera. It’s simple, said Catbird, the Good Guy wears a white hat and the Bad Guy wears a black hat. The

² Chang Tung-sun in *ETC.*, Spring, 1952.

Good Guy is clean-shaven, the Bad Guy has dark stubble on his chin. Sometimes, said Catbird, there is an In-Between Guy in a gray hat, but he doesn't last. If he starts bad he ends good, and if he starts good he ends bad. The *Reporter* proceeds to editorialize: "Catbird's simple formula is attractive, but before long we will surely discover that it's not so simple to divide the world's cast of characters into Good Guys and Bad Guys, that black-and-white judgments need tempering, and that even the grays are deceptive."

But Washington, according to James Reston, keeps right on dividing the Good Guys from the Bad.³ "Congress," he says, "is now dividing for and against John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, and the main question, about the President's foreign policy decisions in the Korean, Formosan and Indo-China crises, is getting lost." The big issues were buried in a wrangle as to whether Mr. Dulles was right or wrong in his "brink of war" interview in *Life* magazine.

The case of Marriner Eccles, sometime Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, is also instructive. During the depression of the 1930's he was known as a "spender," a disciple of Lord Keynes. With full employment and creeping inflation after the war, Eccles called for a rigorous economy in government. Many financial experts could not believe their ears, for how could a "spender" preach economy? Once a spender, they reasoned, always a spender. But sound fiscal policy must be flexible, and the Keynes theory supports Mr. Eccles: spend in the downswings, save and pay off the debt in the upswings.

SCIENCE IS MULTI-VALUED

Scientists, who take no conclusions for granted, come up from time to time with borderline cases that destroy a familiar, sharp division. When Frederick Wöhler synthesized urea in

³ *New York Times*, January 24, 1956.

his laboratory in 1828, chemists at first refused to credit it. They had been taught to believe that “organic” and “inorganic” substances were forever different. But Whöhler broke out of the Aristotelian strait jacket, boldly took inorganic materials, and made them behave like the organic compound urea. This in effect turned a two-valued situation into a many-valued one and opened new vistas to science. The chemists, in the face of a laboratory demonstration which they themselves could repeat, gradually recovered from their shock, to the great advantage of the progress of chemistry.

Living things are still verbally classified as either “animal” or “vegetable,” but this hard-and-fast distinction no longer holds for biologists. Here is *Euglena*, which digests food like an animal, and employs photosynthesis like a plant. Here are the Ascidians, usually classed as animals, but they produce cellulose, a unique function of plants.

For centuries medical men made a sharp distinction between mind and body. Today most of them accept the idea of psychosomatic medicine, where mind and body are treated as parts of one organism, the total man. It is now admitted that too much worry (psychic) about his balance sheet can give a big executive stomach ulcers (somatic); while too many strawberry sundaes (somatic) may cause Jackie to flunk his history exam (psychic). The mental healing of certain cases of physical illness is an established fact, but the attempt to cure *every* lesion by this means gives us yet another unfortunate example of two-valued thinking.

In 1953, Dr. Elizabeth Forbes-Sempill, forty years old, daughter of the late Lord Sempill, went into a private hospital for an operation, presently to emerge as Dr. Ewan Forbes-Sempill. She was no longer “female” but “male”, and in line for the family title and estates. Dr. Elizabeth is only one case in

many where modern surgery has reversed the supposedly irreversible fact of one's sex.

Fluorine is now the subject of a bitter two-valued debate. It is of course a *poison* in any considerable dose. But one part to a million in drinking water protects children's teeth against decay, and no deleterious effects have been detected. Certain towns in the West for years have been safely drinking local water containing up to thirty parts in a million. Many citizens apparently are reasoning, however, "fluorine is either a poison or it is not. If it is, we don't want any part of it in our drinking water." They are blocking adoption, and their children, one fears, are going to pay a heavy price for this exercise in bad logic.

You are either dead or alive—but are you? Here is Harry A. Jones, sixty-six, of Long Beach, California.⁴ He was found by his wife slumped over his desk, and the doctor she summoned could find "no pulse, no heart beat nor any sign of breath." He was pronounced dead, and a hearse was called to take him to the mortuary. On the road, the blankets covering him began to move, causing the driver of the hearse a very bad moment. Mr. Jones happily "came back to life, and the astonished doctors at Long Beach Veterans Hospital said he was making a remarkable recovery."

ZONING AGAIN

Our town held a zoning hearing to discuss whether a man should be permitted to open a toy shop in an area zoned for residences. Arguments flew back and forth, each a little more general and a little more heated than the last, until an all-out battle began to rage between those who held that "little business" was good for rural towns, and those who were positive it was bad—a strictly black-or-white battle. The questions of

⁴ AP dispatch, September 11, 1954.

what particular kind of business, the possible hardship to the applicant, the force of the zoning code already adopted—all were forgotten in the mighty hassle. The debate, stimulating as it was to the contestants, became meaningless so far as the problem in hand was concerned. Members of the Board who hoped to benefit by the hearing were only further confused.

Later, however, when the Board met in executive session, it had to make a two-valued decision—whether to allow the toy shop or deny it.⁵ Many variables had to be considered for which the public hearing contributed almost nothing.

Local communities constantly run into similar discussions, discussions that are meaningless until they are pulled down to earth. You have heard plenty of them:

Private schools vs. public schools.

City living vs. country living.

Chemical fertilizers vs. good old barn manure. (This one can get very bitter indeed, with manure usually way ahead on a decibel count.)

Science vs. religion.

Freedom vs. regimentation.

The last argument has been around for a long time. One side in the debate says we must have complete freedom or submit to slavery. But a philosopher saw the fallacy when he observed: “Your freedom to swing your arms ends where my nose begins.” Freedom is always relative: freedom to do what? Using the two-valued approach in a situation that has many values is like stepping into a shower bath without a mixer, a stream which runs either scalding hot or freezing cold.

John Doe and Richard Roe are arguing about the respective places of Truman and Eisenhower in history. “Truman contained Russia with the Marshall Plan, to his eternal credit!” says Doe. “Eisenhower stopped the Korean War, to his eternal

⁵ The Board denied.

credit!” says Roe. . . . And so on, with steadily rising voices. To the listener, it soon appears that the argument is so two-valued for each contestant that their minds can never meet. There is a simple way to test this—provided the listener can get the floor. He asks John Doe: “Did Truman ever do anything wrong?” “No!” exclaims Doe. The listener turns to Roe. “Did Truman ever do anything right?” Another “No!” is clear proof that the situation is beyond human aid.

ARYANS AND NON-ARYANS

Hitler, like all fanatics and demagogues, preferred to operate in terms of black or white. He divided humanity into Aryans (good) and non-Aryans (bad). Then he proceeded to examine a great variety of things on the same basis. Is this piece of music Aryan or non-Aryan? If the latter, put the composer in a concentration camp! Is this painting Aryan? Does this book, this piece of architecture, this mathematics, physics, religion, system of calisthenics, cookery, conform to Aryanism? The Japanese, as valuable allies to Germany, posed a nice logical problem. Obviously they were “good,” but also by no stretch of the imagination could they be classed as members of the Aryan race. The tough problem was solved by giving them the special designation of “non-non-Aryans.” Ultimately it covered quite a group of allies.

The Russian Communists have had similar difficulties with their music, theater, ballet, novels, poetry, painting, women’s clothes, science, and practically everything else. Conclaves of scientists have solemnly met in Moscow to decide what was “Marxian physics” and what was not. The Lysenko controversy about the principles of genetics was a strictly two-valued row.

In Moscow, everything the regime considers good is labeled “Communistic,” everything bad is “capitalistic”; very little is in-between. Such thinking is characteristic of totalitarian

regimes, which to stay in power must make sharp, police-court distinctions between friends and enemies. A man who says “a plague on both your homes” goes to Siberia. Reinhold Niebuhr sums it up:⁶

Lenin did not, of course, originate the fanaticism that was inherent in the whole Marxist dogma, with its too simple distinctions between exploited and exploiter, its too-simple conception of the close structure of society, its too-simple derivation of all social evil from the institution of property, and its consequent division of the whole world into friends and enemies “of the people.” Stalin boasted considerable flexibility . . . but it never dissolved the fanaticism. Thus, we could be allies of the Russians during the war, but it was not long before . . . the world was sharply divided once more into the hosts of good and evil.

REVERSE TWIST

Stalin and Hitler had no monopoly on the totalitarian logic. It is incipient in every community where a leader strives for absolute power. Eternal vigilance is the price of political freedom. After World War II, when Americans relaxed this vigilance, certain demagogues managed to capture the headlines with arguments that not only divided the world into black and white nations (very few were white), but divided all U.S. citizens into either Communist sympathizers or “patriots.” McCarthy’s followers insisted that anyone who criticized the Senator was a Communist, or at best a fellow traveler.⁷ Such reasoning turns an honest difference of opinion into a criminal charge, and can fill the land with fear and conflict.

After Bishop Sheil of Chicago criticized McCarthy in 1954,

⁶ *New Leader*, October 3, 1955.

⁷ This is also a circular argument. “Mr. X. is a Communist.” “How do you know?” “Because he disagrees with me.” “Why does he disagree with you?” “Because I am against Communism.”

letters bristling with black-or-white choices began to appear in the papers, reading like this:⁸

Destroy all Communists in America—it's either them or us!

I am aware that some highly respected personalities have joined in the attack on McCarthy, but in my book, regardless of their big names, anyone who seeks to discredit McCarthy is sympathetic to the Reds.

Say! Whose side are you on anyway?

The attack on McCarthy is the front line of a continuing attack on the U.S. Congress which will end only in the destruction of the Communists or of the Congress.

A curious by-product appeared as demagogic voices grew more shrill. For a time it seemed that loyal citizens who dared not attempt a direct challenge were increasingly forced to take the *opposite* of every position assumed by Moscow. If Moscow advocates disarmament, we must oppose it; if Moscow is for peace, we must be for war; if Moscow demands economic aid to backward countries, we must be against it. In effect, such citizens were bound fast to the foreign policy of the Kremlin, leaving American policy no room in which to maneuver! Republicans and Democrats suffer from a similar obsession. When one party introduces a good bill in Congress, members of the other party feel bound to oppose it.

WE OR THEY

This brings us to the number one question threatening our planet—how to avoid World War III. For the present the belligerents are observing a thermonuclear truce, but the stockpiles are growing day by day in East and West. To avoid ultimate explosion, negotiation on various levels must be attempted—everything from joint weather stations to disarma-

⁸ Actual quotations from these letters. The last one is a thin-entering-wedge case.

ment proposals. But how can negotiation be seriously considered, much less experimented with, if the East stubbornly insists that it cannot live in the same world with “capitalism,” and the West stubbornly insists that it cannot live in the same world with “Communism”? C. L. Sulzberger, after a long interview with Molotov, reported that “Moscow continues to view the two systems as incompatible, as implacably hostile. There is no third or middle way.”⁹

HOMEWORK

A lot of us, however, lock ourselves up whenever such issues are before the house. Here is the front page of the *New York Times* for March 18, 1956. There are at least three headline stories which can be, and are, reduced to black-or-white reasoning. I will give the exact headline, and then my comments.

“TRUMAN ASSAILS GOP ASSERTION REDS ARE LOSING”

Reds are *either* gaining (Truman), *or* losing (Dulles). A terrific battle is in progress over Dulles’ statement that the U.S. is in a stronger position, vis-à-vis Russia, in early 1956 than it was in early 1955. The arguers talk as if they were viewing a prize fight, and discussing who is ahead on points. Actually, of course, the Soviets are gaining in some places—as in the Middle East, and losing in other places —as in Germany, with the creation of the new German Army. Where the balance lies, nobody really knows, and it would take a large university staff to find out.

“ELLENDER WARNS SOUTH ON FORCE”

The Senator’s warning is wise, but his logic takes the form: *either* peaceful and strong protest, *or* back to the days of

⁹ *New York Times*, January 14, 1956.

reconstruction and the carpetbaggers. It is not so simple, Senator. The South of 1956 is not the South of 1866. Her economy is vastly different, with industrial penetration everywhere; relations with the North are very different; and above all the Negro population is now almost a hundred years away from slavery. Violence by Southerners may bring catastrophe, but it will not be that of reconstruction days.

“FRENCH AGAIN ADD TO ALGERIAN FORCE”

Algeria must *either* be free, *or* be enslaved by France—such seems to be the logic of the Algerian nationalists. Again too simple; it does not allow for more than a million Frenchman living in Algeria, and for other profound complications.

Any front page on almost any day can give us similar homework in finding shades of gray.