

# Modern anti-god unable to say 'No'

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By PHILIP RIEFF

Those of us in middle life have seen the moral world around us appear to turn upside down.

You name it—sex, politics, work, family, abortion, crime, law, drugs, race. Whatever the subject, things seem to be topsy-turvy.

Did our ancestors have it all wrong, at least for our time? Is there no real good and evil?

Some say that "ideals" are meant to be unattainable, like a moral alarm clock that we deliberately set much too early. All of us, then, could cheat a little and grab, say, an extra hour's sleep.

Still others say that in the second half of the 20th century, our moral clocks have lost their hands, and we are free at last to make up our own version of what time it really is.

To answer these claims, consider how moral orders have worked from the oldest societies known to the very near present.

In every culture, guides are chosen to help men conduct themselves through those passages from one crisis of choice to another that constitute the experience of living.

A CULTURE, in fact, survives only as far as the members of a culture learn how to narrow the range of

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choices otherwise open to them. Safely inside their culture—more precisely, the culture safely inside them—members of it are disposed to enact only certain possibilities of behavior while refusing even to dream of others.

It is culture, deeply installed as authority, that generates depth of character; and character must involve the capacity to say "No."

A man can resist the multiplicity of experience if his character is anchored deeply enough by certain values to resist shutting endlessly among all.

These values forbid certain actions and encourage others; and they express those significant inhibitions that characterize us all alike in a culture. It is by virtue of these values and their shared character that members of the same culture expect each other to behave in certain ways and not in others.

To prevent the expression of everything—that is the irreducible function of culture. By the creation of opposing values—of ideals of militant truths—a seal is fastened upon the terrific capacity of man to express everything.

Even now, with all their experience of default among candidates for the office, ordinary men still crave guides for their conduct. And not merely guiding principles. Abstractions will never do. Values have to be exempli-

fied in order to be taught, or, at least, vital examples must be pointed to and a sense of indebtedness (which is the same as guilt) encouraged toward the imitation of these examples.

OUR CULTURE is in crisis today precisely because no creed, no symbol, no militant truth, is instilled deeply enough now to help men constrain their capacity for expressing everything.

Internalized values from an earlier period in our moral history no longer hold good. Western men are sick precisely of those interior ideals which have shaped their characters. Accordingly, they feel they have no choice except to try to become free characters; and to believe that man is the supreme being for man.

What characterizes modernity, I think, is just this idea that men need not submit to any power—higher or lower—other than their own. It is in this sense modern men really believe they are becoming gods.

THIS BELIEF is the exact reverse of the truth: Modern men are becoming anti-gods.

Because the terms in which our god was conceived can exist only so long as they limit the capacity of man to express everything, our old god was never so uninhibited as today's young man. Our god was bound, after all, by the terms of various covenants.

In the next culture, there are to be no priests, not even secular ones. We are not to be guided—rather, entertainment, stimulation, liberation from the constraints drawn around us by the narrowing guidelines become the

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functional equivalents of guidance. To emphasize the harmlessness of the new man—the individual freed from cultural inhibitions—Oscar Wilde in one of his greatest essays compares him to both the artist and the child.

"It will be a marvelous thing—the true personality of man—when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flower-like, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. . . . It will know everything. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things.

"It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child."

Nothing here hints how human personality can stabilize itself except by installing ideals in opposition to one another. What the author is really saying is that if nothing is prohibited, then there will be no transgressions.

BUT IN POINT of psychiatric and historical fact, it is NO, rather than YES, upon which all culture and inner development of character depend. Ambivalence will not, I think, be eliminated; it can only be controlled and exploited. Ideal self-concepts, militant truths, are modes of control. Character is the restrictive shaping of possibility.

What Wilde called "personality" represents a dissolution of restrictive shapings. In such freedom, grown men would act less like cherubic children than like demons, for they would disrupt the restrictive order of character and social life.

ONE SIGN of this demonic tendency is the currency of two old words: "Why not?"

The modern German writer Her-

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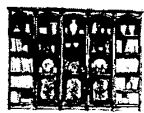
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