Morality From Science?

ERNEST J. PLATA

SCIENTIFIC PRINCIPLES AND MORAL CONDUCT
By James B. Conant
Cambridge University Press, New York, 1967 47 pp $1.95

Doctor Plata is a staff fellow in research in human cancer virology at the National Cancer Institute, and he teaches physiological chemistry at Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C. His master of science and doctor of philosophy degrees were earned in the fields of microbiology and virology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

A lecture delivered by James B. Conant before the A. S. Eddington Foundation, of Cambridge University, is recorded in *Scientific Principles and Moral Conduct.* The Eddington Foundation sponsors this lectureship to deal with aspects of scientific thought considered as it bears on the philosophy of religion or on ethics and to explore the relationship of the scientific, the philosophical, and the religious methods of seeking truth. In this presentation Doctor Conant discusses whether a normative system, a guide of conduct, can be based on science alone and whether there is a unity that underlies these three methods.

He divides all human experience into three realms: nature (manipulation of objects), human nature (encounters between people), and religious experience. He argues convincingly that since most moral problems arise from interactions between people, rather than from interaction with inanimate objects, a standard of conduct must be derived from either the realm of human nature or the realm of religious experience.

The validity of a normative system derived from religious experience rests either on one's own religious experiences or on a firm belief in the dogmas of one religious branch or another. This means, in turn, complete confidence in reported religious experience. A normative scheme from the realm of human nature can be appraised only by examining the conduct of its adherents.

There are many men and women whose ambition is to be moral persons. They would subscribe to a set of interlocking statements, any one of which, if taken by itself, would be difficult to justify and accept. Thus moral man envisages his primary function not in forwarding change in the accepted set of postulates that guide his actions, but in the development of a society in which an even larger number of people conduct themselves according to principles he has made his own.

Doctor Conant shows how a scientist is guided in his scientific experiments by the established principles of the entire man-made fabric of contemporary science. But when he is out of his laboratory, he is guided in his interpersonal relations by another normative system. The two systems, the author contends, are totally unrelated.

Concerning the question of whether a system of morality based on religion might be more desirable or less desirable than one based on human experience, the author chooses to remain silent. Whereas, he says, in science there is only one conceptual scheme, in religion and human nature there are many different concepts to order the

experiences associated with personal encounters. The justification of a choice is stated in terms of a conceptual scheme with many posits, but often the choice is made not on the grounds of logic but on the basis of emotional experiences in childhood.

About the integration of the three avenues toward truth, he states that the conceptual schemes in each of these realms are man-made fabrics, and each, individually, must stand the test of consistency and simplicity. An attempt to formulate a unifying hypothesis or theory that can bring together the essential elements of the three realms is a presumptuous undertaking. One must instead confront a specific deduction from the conceptual scheme of one category with a relevant deduction from another, and thus form an integrational statement that encompasses the three realms. Some deductions are unprofitably discussed when there is paucity of our knowledge concerning them in one or more realms. Thus, every thoughtful person must function at times as a lay physicist, at almost all times as a moralist, and at times as a lay theologian.

The many hours of thought engendered by this booklet clearly justify its cost and the hour of reading.

A Matter of Fertility

BRUCE E. TRUMBO

FAMINE — 1975! AMERICA'S DECISION: WHO WILL SURVIVE?
By William and Paul Paddock
Little, Brown, and Company, Boston, 1967 276 pp cloth $6.50 paper $2.35

The reviewer is associate professor of statistics and mathematics at California State College at Hayward. He holds the doctor of philosophy degree (1965) in mathematical statistics from the University of Chicago. He was a National Institutes of Health fellow in biostatistics at Stanford University in 1963-64.

Small children can sometimes endure tedious sermons by playing a word-counting game. Anyone who has ever played the game realizes that its recreational success depends on the selection of an appropriate word to be counted — usually a noun the relationship of which to the subject assures its overuse during the course of the sermon.

I recommend the word *catastrophe* to anyone who dedicates himself to reading every page of *Famine — 1975!* The book is heavily, even excessively, documented, but it is a sermon, a work of single-minded advocacy, rather than a treatise. It contains errors, some of them serious, but its central theme of impending disaster is plausible enough to deserve serious thought.

The Paddocks, of course, did not discover the potentially disastrous relationship between the fertility of humankind and the fertility of the soil. In 1798 the English economist Thomas Robert Malthus predicted eventual famine in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which a modern writer claims has remained "indispensable reading for anyone interested in the problem of undeveloped countries,"[1] even though the subsequent growth of agricultural technology has so far saved the world from the dismal future he predicted.