

LETTERS

THE CHALLENGE OF MAN'S FUTURE

Sir:

May I draw the attention of your readers to a few misconceptions which occur in Prof. Harrison Brown's interesting article, "The Challenge of Man's Future" (*Engineering and Science*, February, 1954).

In discussing the position of those who fight against conception control on the grounds that it is "unnatural," the author makes the mistake of equating "unnatural" with "artificial." This, of course, makes the position of the anticonceptionist rather ludicrous. Dr. Brown ought to credit other people with a little more intelligence.

Popular usage may, indeed, frequently identify the two words, but in this context the term "unnatural" is used in the technical sense proper to treatises on moral philosophy. Used in this sense, it would, for example, be unnatural to remove a

gangrenous limb, although both procedures are highly artificial. Again, the use of contraceptive devices is artificial and homosexual practices are non-artificial, yet both are "unnatural" in the technical moral sense of that word.

These examples are not cited in order to *prove* anything, but merely to illustrate the fact that for a moral philosopher the terms "artificial" and "unnatural" are poles apart in their connotation.

Reference is made to "an almost impossible degree of continence" as an alternative method of control of population. It would be very difficult to estimate just what degree of continence would be necessary, for instance, to keep world population at any given level. Be that as it may, I think it not unreasonable to say that continence in the domain of sex, like the due restraint of any appetite, is largely—though not entirely—a matter of adequate training and motivation in the formative years. In the absence of a goal clearly perceived and earnestly desired, restraint is not only impossible but psychologically hurtful. But given strong motivation, much

can be done that otherwise seems impossible. The toil of a student, the labors of research workers, fathers and mothers, Arctic explorers, all bear witness to this fact. If a higher degree of sexual continence seems impossible in our times, the blame must fall upon the culpable lack of moral and religious training of youth, and the constant incitement to incontinence that is provided in advertising, entertainment, dress and social customs in the average modern city.

Wild and whirling

In speaking about "the guilty ones in this grizzly drama" (this is only one of many examples of what can best be described as "wild and whirling words" in this article), the author refers to those whose name is legion who are "frightened by the creedists."

Most of us are frightened, and rightly so, by signs which warn against high voltage or cancer. Provided that the truth of a moral code or a religious creed can be established and defended on a rational basis, it is a virtue to be "frightened" by it. One suspects that the root cause of Prof. Brown's indignation here is that he has been educated in that school of thought which holds that *all* creeds are without rational foundation, all moral judgments relative, and if any practice is physically, chemically or biologically possible and makes for greater human comfort, one ought to adopt it without any further nonsense.

It would be impossible in the course of a brief letter to state adequately, let alone establish and defend, the position of the moralist in regard to contraception. But since Prof. Brown undertook to write a book on the serious problem of increasing world population and took occasion thereby to criticize the moralists, he had the grave duty of any scholar to give serious study to their point of view. If he did this, it certainly does not appear in the extract published in your February issue.

As a constant reader of *Engineering and Science* and one who will always be grateful for the privilege of having studied for several years at the California Institute, I protest against this assertiveness-without-knowledge being put forth under the banner of science.

Rev. James O'Reilly, *Ph.D.*

Department of Physics and
Mathematics
Mt. St. Mary's College
Los Angeles

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ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE



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PROF. BROWN'S REPLY

Sir:

I was interested in Rev. James O'Reilly's comments concerning the abstract of a chapter from my book, *The Challenge of Man's Future*, which appeared in *Engineering and Science*.

An abstract of an article is usually unsatisfactory and an abstract of a part of a chapter from a book, where one chapter is dependent upon another for substantiation of an argument, is usually doubly unsatisfactory. I say this, not because I believe that this particular abstract in any way gave the wrong impression concerning either my convictions or the facts upon which they are based. Rather, I say this because Dr. O'Reilly clearly believes that I have been unfair in my presentation. In this connection, it is my sincere hope that he will convey his impressions to me after he has read the complete argument.

Clearly, there is little possibility of our agreeing on the issue of birth control, for *a priori* we occupy different positions by virtue of the different conditioning processes to

which we, as individuals, have been exposed. But I do believe that it is possible for us to agree upon whether or not I have been unfair, for I doubt very much that Dr. O'Reilly considers a person to be unfair simply because that person expresses convictions which differ from his own.

At the outset, I would like to stress that I, in common with many of my colleagues, am weary of the cliché of the amoral, Godless scientist. Had I no clear set of moral values, I would not have written *The Challenge of Man's Future*. To be sure, my set of moral values differs from that of Dr. O'Reilly in many respects. And I admit that I do not consider my set of moral values to be absolute. Dr. O'Reilly has found what he believes to be the Truth. I can only say that I search for the Truth, to possess moral values which, although not absolute in Dr. O'Reilly's sense, have nevertheless been held by men throughout the ages, among them Jesus. And in this connection I cannot restrain myself from adding that many of the moral judgments of the Church to which Dr. O'Reilly has dedicated himself have changed not only with time but with geography and with culture.

If my interpretation of the creed-

ist's use of "unnatural" to mean "artificial" instead of "perverted" is contrary to Dr. O'Reilly's understanding, it certainly accords with the meaning as understood by many Catholic laymen of my acquaintance. This is indeed a question of semantics and I apologize if I have offended that small segment of the Catholic faith which understands the subtleties of technical moral language in the way that Dr. O'Reilly does.

A more important point involves my statement concerning the "fear of creedists". Here, Dr. O'Reilly confuses respect for the truth of creedists' creeds, which I did not mean, with fear of their political power, which I did mean. This latter fear is felt by large numbers of people, as the most casual observation of the day-to-day political scene shows clearly.

It is obvious, for example, that the Catholic Church officially opposes the right of any person, of any creed, to use contraceptives. This opposition has led to the prevention or break-up of meetings of non-Catholics where birth-control was to be discussed, to attempted boycotts of magazines, to the incredible campaigns of misrepresentation involving birth-control legislation in Massachusetts. I believe

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that Dr. O'Reilly himself would agree that the lack of attention to birth control given by both national and international public agencies and by our great foundations results not from "fear of creed" but from "fear of creedists".

Dr. O'Reilly discusses continence at some length, and it seems clear that he believes that the proper solution of the world's population problems lies in the direction of restraining sexual activity. I believe that we could join in serious debate as to whether continence is more "unnatural" (or "artificial") than the use of contraceptives.

To be sure, a degree of continence has resulted in lowered birth rates in Ireland, but I seriously doubt that it is either desirable or possible to create such a culture on a worldwide basis. Even in strong Catholic countries such as France and Italy, to what extent does strict continence contribute to lowered birth-rate? Can we imagine a France and an Italy in which populations are

stabilized without recourse to unnatural or artificial means?

In conclusion, I cannot refrain from commenting upon Dr. O'Reilly's accusation that I have resorted to the use of "wild and whirling words". I found the accusation surprising, for I personally considered my description of attitudes and actions concerning contraception to be both moderate and polite. Indeed, as Dr. O'Reilly knows full well, my words were mild when compared to some that have been uttered by his fellow churchmen in opposition to birth control. Here, I refer to Father Daniel A. Lord's reference to women who use contraceptives as "daughters of Joy" and to Father Dominic Pruemmer's statement that "birth control is nothing else than mutual masturbation or unnatural lust."

Such statements indicate that when it comes to the use of "wild and whirling words," I am a novice.

Harrison Brown

*Division of Geological Sciences
California Institute of Technology*

as the economic problems confronting all men become more serious.

Thus, it is not merely a question of how many people can the earth support, but also, how will our economy and society adjust itself to the complex problems associated with cutting a smaller and smaller pie into more and more pieces?

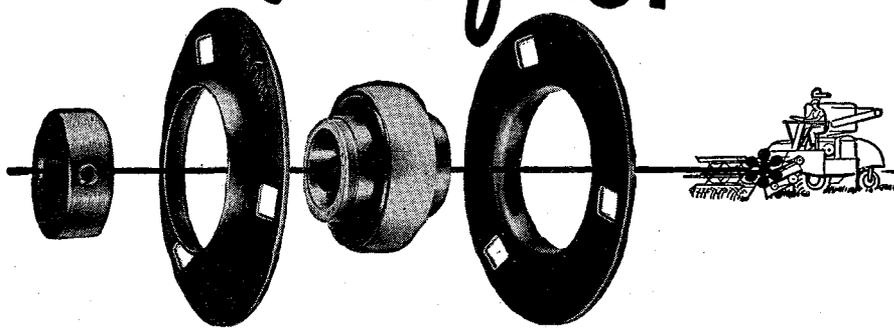
What of science and technology? Can they not save us from the apparently inevitable drift towards want? In a chapter entitled "Horizons and Mirages," Osborn takes a close look at certain limited possibilities for increasing food production. Recent trawling operations in the Bering Sea and off the coast of Washington have revealed astounding storehouses of edible marine life on the ocean floor in these regions. In addition, plankton, seaweeds, pond culture, yeasts and algae can be of some help. But all these put together, even if intensively developed, would only delay, not avoid, the inevitable "Hour of Decision" (Osborn's final chapter). The brute fact is that we are behaving, population-wise at least, like a hutch full of rabbits, and our capacity to reproduce far exceeds our capacity to produce those things upon which life itself is based.

Global birth control?

Inevitably, we must decide to extend the practice of the limitation of the human capacity for reproduction. Already two nations of the world have declared it in the national interest to practice birth control. Interestingly, although one of these nations (India) is beset by a serious food shortage already upon her, the other (Sweden) is operating with unusual and commendable foresight, being under no greater population pressure than are we at the present time. Opposition to global birth control will certainly be widespread, especially in Catholic circles, yet Osborn is confident that under the press of circumstances, even religious dogma can be altered.

In brief, then, either we make the decision to stabilize our population to match some existing or future level of production, or other forces (perhaps the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse) will make it for us. We cannot evade the choice. In clarifying the nature of this problem, Osborn has scored again, with a worthy successor to *Our Plundered Planet*.

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