

January 1, 1992 (Vol. 7, no. 9)

Dear Colleague:

"Just say no!" Coming from Nancy Reagan, no one is inclined to take the advice seriously. On the face of it, it does sound absurd to ask underclass kids to say no to drugs, which means saying no not only to their only escape from hell to a brief sojourn in chemical heaven, but no to the only source of human warmth that they are likely to know, namely, membership in a gang. Who can say no? Surely not middle-class kids who gang up on the Boy with the Green Hair (title of a 'forties movie), and not we sophisticated adults either who, from fear of exclusion from the Inner Circle, almost daily subtly betray friends and ideals.

In the inanimate world that physicists and astronomers study, "no" is perhaps an impossibility. It won't do for an electron or a planet to say no to its field of force and wander off on its own. Everywhere, one finds submission. In the world of living things, perhaps this is no longer quite the case. As the frustrated biologist, George Wald, puts it, "Under precisely controlled conditions, an animal does as it damn pleases!" Animals differ, however, in their ability to say no. Cats are better at it than dogs. Love a cat and she may or may not love you back. Dogs, by contrast, have less choice: hence, for them, one feels affection rather than respect. As for humans, their dignity rests on their ability to say no--no not only to the wiles of Satan, but no even to the love of God.

"Man must never be so misguided as to believe that he has ascended to the position of lord and master over Nature, but must understand the fundamental necessity of Nature's rule...He [must] perceive that in a universe where planets revolve around the sun, moon moves around planet, in which strength is always master over weakness, and either forces it to be an obedient servant or crushes it, there cannot be special laws for man." So Hitler says in Mein Kampf. Well, maybe the moon cannot say no to the earth, but Germans could have said no to Hitler, and some did. And those who did are our heroes today.

"Just say no." Realistically, we can't expect kids to say no to drugs. We can't expect anyone to say no, if the "no" goes against strong social and physiological pressures. Yet, unless we postulate the possibility of saying no, we deprive ourselves--that is, everyone--of that minim of freedom which is our ultimate claim to respect. Social science depends on people always saying yes; morality, by contrast, depends on people being able to say, occasionally, no.

Best wishes,

