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## The Evolution of Cultural Norms

"All men by nature desire to know." So basic did Aristotle regard this insight that he began his *Metaphysics* with this assertion. But when does man know for sure? Individually, in private, a man may be satisfied with many degrees of "hardness" of knowledge, ranging from the mystical on up (or down?) to the sort of thing a consulting engineer must restrict himself to when he testifies in court. The world of scholarship is a court of public opinion, and so the discussion that takes place in it leans toward the "hard" end. Anticipating criticism, scholars seek rational explanations of the way the world works.

No matter how we may view ourselves, in trying to control the behavior of others we necessarily assume that others are susceptible to specifiable rewards and punishments. Part of the repertoire of behavioral reinforcements is strictly biological and not at all peculiar to human beings. But another part—and not a small one—is cultural. If I consent to serve as the chairman of the United Fund Christmas drive it is at least in part because I anticipate subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) rewards from my community. In contrast, when I stop at a red signal light at a time when no cross traffic is in sight, I do so because I anticipate the possibility of a traffic ticket. There are the two sorts of sanctions our actions are subject to—informal and formal (legal). Sanctions conserve culture.

Put slightly differently, culture rewards individuals. An obsolete culture, by definition, rewards behavior that is contrary to the larger goals of society, including survival. Sanctions that lead to destroy the society that imposes them may, in the strictest sense, be said to be tragic. Although it is obvious that destructive sanctions cannot survive in the long run because their matrix perishes, the existence of destructive sanctions at any particular moment must be regarded as a consequence of an