

# A Cynic Looks at Life



*by Ambrose Bierce*



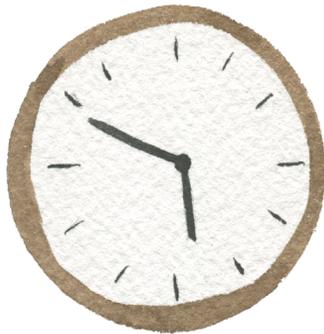
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## *Civilization*

**T**he question “Does civilization civilize?” is a fine example of *petitio principii*, and decides itself in the affirmative; for civilization must needs do that from the doing of which it has its name. But it is not necessary to suppose that he who propounds is either unconscious of his lapse in logic or desirous of digging a pitfall for the feet of those who discuss; I take it he simply wishes to put the matter in an impressive way, and relies upon a certain degree of intelligence in the interpretation.

Concerning uncivilized peoples we know but little except what we are told by travelers—who, speaking generally, can know very little but the fact of uncivilization, as shown in externals and irrelevances, and are moreover, greatly given to lying. From the savages we hear very little. Judging them in all things by our own standards in default of a knowledge of theirs, we necessarily condemn, disparage and belittle. One thing that civilization certainly has not done is to make

us intelligent enough to understand that the contrary of a virtue is not necessarily a vice. Because, as a rule, we have but one wife and several mistresses each it is not certain that polygamy is everywhere—nor, for that matter, anywhere—either wrong or inexpedient. Because the brutality of the civilized slave owners and dealers created a conquering sentiment against slavery it is not intelligent to assume that slavery is a maleficent thing amongst Oriental peoples (for example) where the slave is not oppressed. Some of these same Orientals whom we are pleased to term half-civilized have no regard for truth. “Takest thou me for a Christian dog,” said one of them, “that I should be the slave of my word?” So far as I can perceive, the “Christian dog” is no more the slave of his word than the True Believer, and I think the savage—allowing for the fact that his inaccuracy has dominion over fewer things—as great a liar as either of them. For my part, I do not know what, in all circumstances, is right or wrong; but I know that, if right, it is at least stupid, to judge an uncivilized people by the standards of morality and intelligence set up by civilized ones. Life in civilized countries is so complex that men there have more ways to be good than savages have, and more to be bad; more to be happy, and more to be miserable. And in each way to be good or bad, their generally superior knowledge—their knowledge of more things—enables them to commit greater excesses than the savage can. The civilized philanthropist wreaks upon his fellows a ranker philanthropy, the civilized rascal a sturdier rascality. And—splendid triumph of enlightenment!—the two characters are, in civilization, frequently combined in one person.

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