

---

# Pro Rege

---

Volume 7 | Number 1

Article 4

---

September 1978

## Bumper Sticker Morality: The Ethics of Feeling

Nick Van Til  
*Dordt College*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Van Til, Nick (1978) "Bumper Sticker Morality: The Ethics of Feeling," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 7: No. 1, 17 - 24.

Available at: [http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol7/iss1/4](http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol7/iss1/4)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).



A quarterly faculty publication of  
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

# Bumper Sticker Morality: The Ethics of Feeling

---

by Nick Van Til  
Professor of Philosophy



*Mr. Van Til is a charter member of the Dordt faculty and is chairman of the Theology-Philosophy Department. He regularly teaches a course in Ethics.*

## The Modern Trend

From time to time advertisers for one product or another have made an appeal to the "thinking man." For example, there have been "thinking man" cigarettes in spite of the fact that smoking is a highly irrational form of behavior in view of the carcinogenic effects of tobacco. One of the whiskey distillers regularly has used a kind of snob appeal; presumably its whiskey is for those people who are a cut above the average in intelligence, accomplishment and thoughtful discrimination. Those ads had the force of insinuating that the common people go on their way unthinkingly and take their pleasures unthinkingly as well.

When we stop to consider it, we notice that most of our common activities require no particular thought but proceed from habit. Ethical choices may also become habitual. And that is good. In fact, much of the value of Christian nurture hinges on the value of this characteristic of training. We may hope and should pray that our young people will act according to the patterns which have become their habit by reason of nurture according to Christian principles. This is not to say that we want them to go through life as automatons. But we expect that they will lean heavily on parental and communal values while they are self-consciously appropriating their own from the same Christian sources.

Habituation should furnish the momentum which will carry them over into maturity of judgment and self-conscious choices.

Today, as we survey the state of American morality, I think we would have to conclude that neither Christian nurture nor reasoned discrimination is furnishing the basis for moral choices. The current emphasis is away from Christian principles and reason toward an emphasis on feeling. One bumper sticker reads, "If it feels good, do it." I have seen the same legend painted on the side of a van with a cartoon depicting a dog rubbing his itching back against a tree. With that emphasis on pleasure from the senses it is not difficult to see the double entendre effect of the slogan as an encouragement to sexual indulgence.

With the coming of bumper sticker religion ("Honk if you love Jesus") and bumper sticker psychology ("Have you hugged your kid today?"), we might have anticipated bumper sticker ethics as well. What is noteworthy about the implied ethics in current slogans, songs, and advertisements is the assumption that feelings can be the measure of the good. The most popular song of 1977 (and an Academy Award winner) asks, "How can it be wrong when it feels so right?" Another song intones, "Feeling, nothing but feeling." Feelings also are used to authenticate religious convictions. The secular slogans seem to indicate that we ought to get our kicks wherever and whenever we can. In religion it indicates a tendency to cut the Spirit loose from the Word.

### **The Ancient Statements**

We shouldn't succumb to a kind of "what's the world coming to" attitude, supposing that the principle of sensual pleasure-seeking as enunciated by the

bumper sticker is unique to our segment of the twentieth century. As early as the third century B.C., Epicurus advocated pleasure as the measure of the good and sensation as the source of pleasure. Moreover, Epicurus didn't want people to be inhibited in their here and now enjoyment of pleasure by any dark thoughts of a day of reckoning after death. In a letter to Menoecus he advised, "Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation." Though Epicurus did not forthrightly declare himself an atheist he did insist that the gods do not decide what is the good for man and that the gods do not have retributive tendencies.

The later Roman Epicurean, Lucretius (99-55 B.C.), went to great lengths to deny the possibility for any connection between the deity and ethical demands. He specifically denied the possibility of creation out of nothing by God. Lucretius emphatically stated, "Nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing." In lieu of creation he installs a form of evolution, and he appropriates what is virtually the principle of the conservation of mass when he stated, "Nature resolves everything into its component atoms and never reduces anything to nothing." Lucretius went on to espouse a thoroughgoing materialism as he attempted to prove that "nothing exists that is distinct both from body and vacuity." Vacuity was Lucretius' name for space, so all reality could be subsumed under the idea of bodies in space.

By confining reality to material limits Lucretius was forced to accept matter as the basis for all knowledge. He proposed that solution by suggesting, "Therefore, besides matter and vacuity, we cannot include in the number of things any third substance

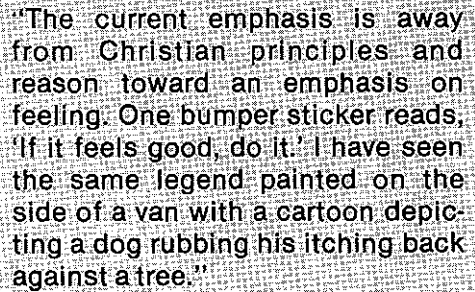
that can either affect our senses at any time or be grasped by the reasoning of our minds." And then, as if anticipating men like Wittgenstein and the language analysis philosophers, Lucretius added, "You will find that anything that can be named is either a property or an accident of these two,"<sup>2</sup> that is, properties of bodies or space.

From the foregoing we may conclude that atheism and materialism were basic presuppositions for much of ancient sensate hedonistic (pleasure as the basic good) ethics. However, before we move forward to note the same emphasis in modern thought, we should notice that ancient rationalistic idealism was no closer to Christian theism than hedonism in its moral foundations.

Socrates, while presumably honoring the gods by denying that he espoused atheism, nevertheless proposed an ethical base for morality which could not be touched by the will of the deities. In the *Euthyphro*, one of Plato's dialogues, Socrates is represented as establishing the point that "the holy has been acknowledged by us to be loved of God because it is holy, not to be holy because it is loved."<sup>3</sup> Seen in the larger context of Plato's theory of knowledge and ethics, the statement means that both God and man can know the good, or anything at all for that matter, only in so far as they are in contact with the eternal, immutable Ideas which for Plato constituted true being and were the foundation of all knowing. For Plato our contact with the Ideas came through intuitive reason, but, for all that, his system is just as atheological as is that of Lucretius' sensate hedonism.

Some of the present day philosophical relatives of Socrates are just as convinced as he was that we don't need the God of the Scriptures for our transcendent authority in ethics. William Frankena, Professor Emeritus

of Philosophy of the University of Michigan, maintained, in a 1976 address to the Iowa Philosophic Society, that we do not need any reference "beyond morality" as the basis for our moral decisions. Frankena maintained that our reason is adequate for the assessments and judgments which go into our moral choices. Years earlier, in a *Harvard Educational Review* article, he maintained that we do not need a religious foundation for the teaching of morals in our public schools.



"The current emphasis is away from Christian principles and reason toward an emphasis on feeling. One bumper sticker reads, 'If it feels good, do it.' I have seen the same legend painted on the side of a van with a cartoon depicting a dog rubbing his itching back against a tree."

### Early Modern Definitions

In the modern period, one of the signal statements of hedonism and the ethics of feeling is found in Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Bentham made a case for what in ethical theory is called psychological hedonism. This brand of hedonism holds that man is so constructed by his very nature that of necessity he pursues pleasure and avoids pain. Man is simply a pleasure-seeking, pain-avoiding animal.

Psychological hedonism should be distinguished from ethical hedonism. The former holds that man always *does* seek pleasure and avoid pain while the latter maintains that man always *ought* to do so. The idea of ought implies a

choice whereas psychological hedonism implies that man is under necessity. Psychological hedonism then comes down to a kind of behaviorism whereby the inevitable response to pleasurable stimuli is appropriation and to the painful, avoidance. Bentham set down the deterministic character of the pleasure-pain response in the following words, "They [pleasure and pain] govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think; every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it."<sup>4</sup>

Bentham proposed that we understand and judge the value of the pleasure-pain equation on the basis of a kind of hedonistic calculus. We should judge concerning their intensity, duration, certainty, nearness, fecundity, i.e., their ability to reproduce their kind, purity and extent. The legislator should understand the decisive quality of the pleasure-pain formula in order to provide incentives and deterrents in the laws which are written. That is not all. He should "take the balance, which, if on the side of pleasure, will give the general good tendency of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned."<sup>5</sup> And so Bentham proposed the principle known as Utilitarianism, the greatest good (pleasure) for the greatest number.

Bentham's principle demanded that pleasure be maximized without making distinctions as to quality. This was to have a salutary and leveling effect in the highly stratified society of his time, when aristocrats did not have much sympathy for the homely pleasures of the peasants. Bentham would contradict the often accepted idea that some humans are destined to serve as the menials in society and so are also destined to a lesser share of life's pleasures.

Bentham's kind of hedonism came

under immediate criticism by those who faulted him for his failure to make a qualitative distinction between kinds of pleasure. By Bentham's measure, so they said, there would be no reason why one should prefer "poetry to pushpins," or poetry to pinball, as we might say. The critics who subscribed to hedonism insisted on a qualitative hedonism in contrast to what they saw as Bentham's quantitative hedonism.

Perhaps the most celebrated of Bentham's critics was John Stuart Mill, himself a hedonist and Utilitarian. Mill proposed, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question."<sup>6</sup>

Mill went on to note that those who do know and appreciate the higher pleasures of mind and spirit occasionally may be influenced by temptation to "postpone them to the lower." Yet he argued that "it is questionable whether anyone who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower."<sup>7</sup> Mill was convinced that rising to the enjoyment of the higher pleasures is mostly a matter of education. Where there is failure it is mostly "by mere want of sustenance." In that respect Mill's approach stands in sharp contrast to that of Plato. With aristocratic bias, Plato assumed that the mass of mankind would be capable only of visceral pleasures. Mental limitations would disqualify them for the pleasures of mind and spirit.

Even Bentham recognized the fact that one cannot live indiscriminately in the pursuit of pleasure. His hedonistic calculus demanded some measurement of pleasure. Bentham also recognized that one would have to take account of

sanctions that are imposed from one direction or another. Physical sanctions impose themselves to put a check on excessive gratification of appetites of whatever kind. Political sanctions intervene to make some pleasure illegal. Social sanctions may raise a disapproving eyebrow. And religious sanctions may arise out of fear of punishment by God or whatever other gods one may worship. One might conceivably disregard all the sanctions at one time or another but when we want to judge between lower and higher of any kind we are bound to ask, "Lower or higher, by what standard?"

Mill tried to solve the problem of standards by suggesting that higher as to pleasure ought to be reckoned according to "the preference felt by those whose opportunities for experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison."<sup>8</sup> Those who have been privileged to enjoy the higher pleasures will educate those who have not been so privileged. And Mill adds, "There is absolutely no reason in the nature of things why an amount of mental culture sufficient to give an intelligent interest in these objects of contemplation, should not be the inheritance of every one born in a civilized country."<sup>9</sup>

For those who have the enjoyment of sensate pleasure as their goal in life sanctions of any kind are mostly considered necessary evils, imposed by nature, or not so necessary evils, imposed for various reasons by a variety of vested interests. Presumably, certain people with Puritan *mein* are congenital killjoys. In any case, no matter what influences are brought to bear in the formation of its mores, society generally imposes restraints on the untrammelled pursuit of pleasure and uninhibited outbursts of feeling.

## Nietzsche's Nuances

Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century German philosopher, applied labels to the two competing tendencies in Greek life which he also saw coming into play in subsequent religious expression. Nietzsche labeled the emotional tendencies Dionysian, after the god of the orgiastic Dionysian festival, the god of the vine and therefore of wine. The rational tendency he labeled Apollonian, after the cult of Apollo. The rational emphasis also received emphasis at the oracle at Delphi inscribed there in the motto, "Nothing too much."

Nietzsche repudiated the ascetic emphasis, which had dominated Western morality largely because of the influence of Christianity. He attributed the ascetic emphasis to the ascetic tendencies of the apostle Paul. That emphasis emasculated life by imposing a variety of taboos. Nietzsche maintained that the will to power was a most basic and a most worthy human drive. A limited number of supermen will be free to exercise the will to power. But to them it is given to ignore social and religious sanctions in the free exercise of power. These privileged ones must bring about a "transvaluation of values." They are allowed to go "beyond good and evil" as construed by Christian principles and as practiced by the common, submissive man. It is not difficult to see that Nietzsche's ideas could readily serve a leader like Hitler as he preached Aryan supremacy.

## The Freudian Slip

The origin of restraints has many natural and naturalistic explanations. According to Freud, happiness is not a cultural value. It must be sublimated if civilization is to progress. The pleasure principle must give place to the reality

principle. Man's instinctual demands, which for Freud are also primitive demands, are basically libidinal, that is, associated with the sex drive. These must be deflected away from immediate and mere physical gratification in favor of future and constructive goals. "Man learns to give up momentary, uncertain, and destructive pleasure for delayed, restrained, but assured pleasure."<sup>10</sup> This may create problems and conflicts but Freud recognized that society has legitimate demands.

Even the history of the Incarnation has been interpreted to take account of

Eros again to the Law; the father-rule would be restored and strengthened."<sup>11</sup>

This Freudian explanation of the Incarnation turns out to be an extension of the primal origins of the guilt complex as Freud relates it to what he sees as a libidinal contest between a son and his father for the sexual attentions of the mother. That bit of egregious Freudian nonsense can also be extended to account for the oppositions between the pleasure principle and the reality principle as we take account of man's progress away from primitive origins.

"The origin of restraints has many natural and naturalistic explanations. According to Freud, happiness is not a cultural value. It must be sublimated if civilization is to progress. The pleasure principle must give place to the reality principle. Man's instinctual demands, which for Freud are also primitive demands, are basically libidinal, that is, associated with the sex drive."

the Freudian conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, or, as otherwise designated, the conflict between the id, the instinctual part of personality, and the super-ego, the sanctions imposed by society. According to Erich Fromm, "the message of the Son was the message of liberation: the overthrow of the Law (which is domination) by Agape (which is Eros) . . . The subsequent transubstantiation of the Messiah, the deification of the Son beside the Father, would be a betrayal of his message by his own disciples—the denial of the liberation in the flesh, the revenge of the Redeemer. Christianity would then have surrendered the gospel of Agape-

I think we can say that most people appropriate the reality principle quite readily though some tend to do so only under duress. All have some escape for the free exercise of the pleasure principle in their fantasies. Most of us have our Walter Mitty interludes. Secular psychologists and such syndicated advisors as Abigail Van Buren recommend sexual fantasizing as a wholesome exercise. Recently a woman expressed guilt feelings concerning the crush she had on one of the butchers in the supermarket because she took account of the biblical prohibition against lusting. Abby wrote that it was an entirely natural and harmless form of fantasizing with no concomitant need for

guilt feelings.

Some who have a strong compulsion toward a sensate hedonism may fail to internalize the restraints of the reality principle to any practical degree. In such cases restraint has to take the form of the physical presence of the policeman on the beat. So it was when the lights went out in the New York City blackout a few years ago. Those who had no internalized sanctions went out to appropriate what for them were the essentials of pleasure achievement, colored TVs and, at one neighborhood agency, luxury cars.

The current emphasis on feeling is not limited to physical, sensual satisfactions. It includes sentiment as opposed to rational calculation and cognition. Early in the history of philosophy, reason was pitted against feeling in the contest for the control of human decision making. What Freud saw as a reality principle in conflict with a pleasure principle Plato took as an extension of a basic form-matter division in the nature of things. Form is the underlying basis for reason, structure, law and the good. Matter is associated with feeling, the demands of the appetites, and that which is amorphous, lawless and evil. For Plato, form furnished the essences of things, and it was the law for existence. The Stoics developed this into the idea of natural law, which is also the law of reason. If we disregard the sanctions furnished by reason, we hazard our physical and psychological well-being.

### **Darwin and Dewey**

The influence of evolution as popularized by Charles Darwin in the latter half of the nineteenth century also dealt a telling blow to the idea of ethical absolutes and a transcendent God as their source. The dictum, "Nature is red

in tooth and claw" could be used to explain the "balance of nature" and the law of the jungle. It could also be used to explain inherent lawlessness in man. Violation of God-given moral sanctions could then escape the opprobrium of being labeled sin and could more readily be excused as a recalcitrance against civility which, according to evolutionism, is only a residual primitivism.

John Dewey based his pragmatism on evolutionistic premises. His pervasive influence on American education had a two-edged ethical cut. Evolution cut away the possibility of any past origins for absolute ethical standards. This served Dewey well, since he detested absolutes. The implications of constant change and adjustment as evolutionary process also prevented an appropriation of anything like fixed goals for the future. Dewey was the sworn enemy of the codification of ethical precepts. Such codification might prohibit an indulgence which could lead to a satisfaction or it might judge some form of growth to be a dis-value, whereas growth was for Dewey the nearest thing to an absolute value.

Like workability, which is the root concept of pragmatism, satisfaction and growth need some reference beyond themselves. We may ask, "What kind of growth and what kind of satisfaction?" Then we are back to J.S. Mill, who would relegate the task and privilege of making those judgments to a kind of cultural elite. Dewey is willing to leave the good of society to social planners. And, since his own concepts of workability, growth, and satisfaction are vacuous and he is opposed to any transcendent reference, Dewey is ready to declare man autonomous and trust to his intelligence and good sense. As to Dewey's own values, one may say that he has unwittingly appropriated much that is coincidental with Christianity as



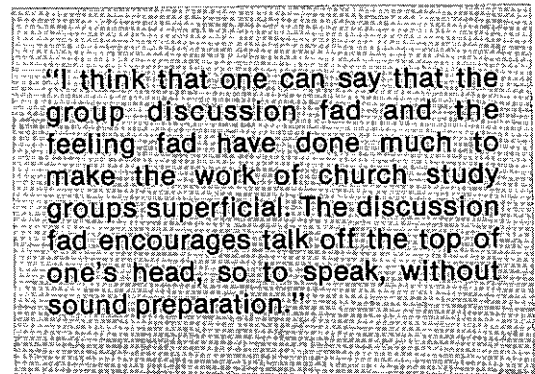
a kind of afterglow of his Christian upbringing. Eager disciples of Dewey have magnified the value of self-expression in order to give large place to an ethics of feeling.

### Contemporary Variations

In his 1978 graduation address at Harvard, Alexander Solzhenitsyn criticized Western man for his materialism and for the "proclaimed autonomy of man from any higher force above him."<sup>12</sup> The Russian expatriate is not alone in his criticism. In fact, several of the subcultures which developed in the late sixties and early seventies made the same criticism and dropped out of society in search of other values and in search of a transcendent. Perversely, they attached themselves to such pseudo-transcendents as LSD, Zen-Buddhism, transcendental meditation and various primitivisms. The Charismatics are also part of that revolt and reaction. The revolt against the establishment was also an escape into subjectivism, relativism and irrationalism and fostered the fad of feeling which dominates the behavior of many who are in their teens and twenties at the present time.

As we survey the elements which make up the ethical mixture which is the compound for current moral trends, we cannot overlook the influence of existentialism. Religious existentialists declare God to be the "Wholly Other" in His complete transcendence and so eliminate the possibility of propositional revelation. In so doing they abandon the field to subjectivism.<sup>13</sup> Atheistic existentialism received its widest support through the work of the philosopher, novelist, playwright, and political activist, Jean-Paul Sartre. Plato held that essences,

that is, eternal Ideas are the pattern for and the substantive predecessors of existing things, including all man-made laws. Sartre reverses that order and says, "Existence precedes essence." So man as an existent is completely free to decide what will be his essential characteristic. The prime essential for man is his freedom. Sartre reiterates the ancient dictum of Protagoras, "Man is the measure of all things," and then chooses in favor of a completely subjective irrational exercise of human autonomy.



"I think that one can say that the group discussion fad and the feeling fad have done much to make the work of church study groups superficial. The discussion fad encourages talk off the top of one's head, so to speak, without sound preparation."

Present day religious leaders have also lent their support to the idea of the ascendance of feeling. Joseph Fletcher in his *Situation Ethics* has cut decision-making loose from law and has lodged it in the feelings of the moment, under guise of putting it under the impetus of Agape, the highest expression of God-loving and neighbor-loving devotion. Though he is a theologian, "Thus saith the Lord" and "Thou shalt not" are muffled in favor of action according to the dictates of one's best feelings in the situation which demands decision.

I think that one can say that the group discussion fad and the feeling fad have done much to make the work of

church study groups superficial. The discussion fad encourages talk off the top of one's head, so to speak, without sound preparation. The resource for discussion is then also more according to feeling than to biblically extracted knowledge. I might add that the remedy is not to be found in proof-texting every expressed opinion but expositing Scriptures with Scriptures to ascertain the whole counsel of God.

Feeling in the guise of religious fervor can be very deceptive, but it seems that some religious leaders have given themselves over to feeling, administering a religio-psychic hypo, as the product of their sermon and service. Rev. Robert Schuller, of "possibility thinking" notoriety, has been quite forthright in stating his intentions. In an interview for the Sioux City Journal he offered the following: "Disneyland accentuates the positive. It creates a happy experience. Critics say that's the problem with the Church. But what do you want to do, run their faces in garbage? Tomorrow they get a call from the doctor diagnosing cancer. They know what the garbage is like. They know it. People can stand all the joy they can get. Any church that doesn't make people feel good when they leave has failed."<sup>14</sup>

### Back to the Word

There you have it. The ethics of feeling leaves the confines of the van which often serves as a mobile bedroom to appear presently in somewhat less sensual form in a ten million dollar glass cathedral as Rev. Schuller plans it. Aside from the fact that it is hardly appropriate to call the vicissitudes of life which may come as chastisements from the hand of God "garbage," one may well ask Rev. Schuller, "Whatever happened to the Heidelberg Catechism

with which you grew up? Is it bad news which should be relegated to the garbage heap too? How am I supposed to feel once I learn how great my sins and miseries are? Good?"

"If it feels good, do it" has apparently fostered the caution, "If it doesn't make them feel good, don't preach it." Bumper sticker ethics has acquired such force that it has bumped the Christian message from the pulpit. Isaiah the prophet proclaimed a ban on the subjectivity of feeling and on feeling as a guide to religion. His message needs to be heard again and again today. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (8:20)

### Footnotes

1. Oliver A. Johnson, "Epicurus to Menoeceus," *Ethics: Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1965, p. 78.
2. Jason L. Saunders, "Lucretius: On the Nature of Things," *Greek and Roman Philosophy after Aristotle*, The Free Press, New York, 1966, p. 15 ff.
3. M. A. Jowett, "Euthyphro," *Dialogues of Plato*, Random House, New York, 1892, Vol. I, p. 392.
4. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapter 1, Sec. I.
5. *Ibid.*, Chap. IV, Sec. I.
6. John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in Johnson *op. cit.*, p. 241.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
10. Sigmund Freud, "Formulation Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning," in *Collected Papers*, Hogarth Press, London, 1950, Vol. IV, p. 14.
11. As quoted by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*, Vintage Books, New York, 1955, p. 63.
12. *Time*, June 19, 1978, p. 33.
13. I use the designation "religious existentialism" as I believe that "Christian existentialism" is a contradiction in terms.
14. Interview with Elizabeth Ancante, *Sioux City Journal*, May 31, 1978.