

THE CLAIMS OF PHILOSOPHY

PHILOSOPHY has not many final conclusions to offer. To the familiar complaint that philosophers are unable to reveal "certainties" to bewildered human beings, that they have no "practical program" for relieving the world of its problems, the admirers of philosophy must admit qualified agreement. One thing, however, is clear: Philosophy makes authentic inquiry into the nature and possibilities of human beings, and it does this on the implied or explicit assumption that such inquiry is important and that it may lead to wisdom.

There is, however, a further argument in philosophy's behalf. It rests in the contention of all serious philosophy that a closed system of belief is an anti-human force. This may be only "negative," but sometimes negative judgment will serve to clear the atmosphere and to prepare the minds of men for the reception of positive convictions.

Historically, both religion and science have on occasion been the means by which men have broken out of closed systems of belief. But both religion and science have also been responsible for creating such systems. It is for this reason that authority in such matters ought to be reserved for philosophy, for philosophy itself can have no body of dogma. Philosophy is by definition the love of truth. A man need not claim to *have* the truth in order to practice philosophy. In our times, he may serve his fellows most effectively by describing those modes of thought and action which make it impossible to find the truth.

Why do men cling to closed systems of belief? First of all, there is in human beings a longing to understand the meaning of their lives. A system of belief is intended to supply a sense of meaning. Then there is the element of fear—the anticipation that we may be unable to cope with our experiences. A closed system of belief is characterized by some sort of promise or guarantee that problems can be met, difficulties overcome, enemies dealt with, happiness assured. Systems of belief strike some sort of balance between these two motivations. If fear is strong, the solution tends to become simple, dogmatic,

unquestionable—and superficial and irrational. If the yearning for understanding is dominant, fewer concessions need be made to fear, and the element of challenge in the system may keep it from becoming a *closed* system. The unclosed systems are those to which the individual must make an original contribution if they are to work at all. In some cases, the contribution of the individual is stylized into ritual observance, making a closed system which *pretends* to be open.

In all cases, however, the key to the system is the conception of the nature of man. What are human beings capable of? Can they work out their destiny alone, or do they need help from some superhuman source? Where do the good and evil in human nature come from? What will make the good more manifest and eliminate the evil?

The problem would be relatively simple if men were all alike. A final accounting of the nature of man could then be had from the statisticians, who would be able to deal in revealing absolutes instead of misleading averages. But men are different. Their capacities vary, likewise their apparent need for help. Some men are preponderantly good, some evil, and very many seem indifferently constituted—a grayish mixture of petty virtues and unimportant vices. And the question of what to control and what to allow free expression is vexed not only by its inherent difficulty, but also by the politics of power, by the vanities of status, and the secret appetites of hypocrisy.

Small wonder that philosophers have retired into caves, and hermits sought lonely deserts! Even if the truth were known about the human species—who would believe it?

The greater wonder is that a few men have been able to practice philosophy while living in the world, and have won honor among their fellows—although persecution as well. Today, perhaps, the historical scene is uniquely inviting to those who would try to be philosophers. For today the lessons of history make plain that human beings are captured and degraded by closed systems. It is even clear that the half- or

quarter-systems of denial are similar in their effects to the systems of belief which they were designed to replace. In the *Saturday Review* for Oct. 2, for example, Norman Cousins writes an editorial to defend Albert Schweitzer against the shallow criticisms of some travelers who have been to Africa and found Schweitzer's hospital "inadequate." The editorial is good, but here we call attention only to a paragraph in which Cousins describes the temper of present-day life:

We live at a time when people seem afraid to be themselves, when they seem to prefer a hard, shiny exterior to the genuineness of deeply-felt emotion. Sophistication is prized and sentiment is dreaded. It is made to appear that one of the worst blights on a reputation is to be called a do-gooder. The literature of the day is remarkably devoid of themes on the natural goodness or even the potential goodness of man, seeing no dramatic power in the most powerful fact of the human mixture. The values of the time lean to a phony toughness, casual violence, cheap emotion; yet we are shocked when youngsters confess to having tortured and killed because they enjoyed it, and because they thought it was the thing to do. . . .

What complex of hopes and fears has made this the face of our civilization? There is more, of course much more—but the picture is sufficiently accurate to be recognized, and that is enough to require an explanation.

Here, perhaps, we have the gross form of reaction to a closed system of belief in which all the goodness was outside of man, all the evil, of Original Sin, within him. Bold spirits broke down the structure of that system, but had nothing to say of morals at all—nothing to raise the estimate of man to a more reliable dignity. This is the heritage of contempt for man—a contempt which was transferred from theology to anti-theology. It does not in itself represent a closed system of belief, or any sort of system at all, but represents rather the entropy of scores of broken-down opinions about the nature of man—encouraging every sort of indulgence and jeering at every restraint.

A little more on this side of the ledger and then we are done with it. In the *Nation* for Oct. 9, Harold Clurman reviews *Most Likely to Succeed*, a new novel by John Dos Passos. Apparently, in the fullness of time, Dos Passos has discovered what is wrong with communist intellectuals. They are just no good. The book deals with the "semi-intellectual bohemia of the

theater and motion-picture world between 1926 and 1941," peopled, in Clurman's phrase, by "vermin." The characters, therefore, Clurman adds, are "hardly typical of anything," and the reviewer remarks: "It should be a literary axiom that the transformation of an ordinary louse into a Communist louse is nothing to write about."

Dos Passos started out after the first world war by writing *Three Soldiers*, a novel about lost human beings. The book touches the heart, even though the young men in it find no essential meaning. From later works by Dos Passos, however, one gets the impression that the world is a maze in which no meaning exists—unless there be meaning in the unrelieved frustration of aimless and unhappy beings. Dos Passos, it seems, became a believer in the closed system of despair. If we can rely on Clurman's analysis, the author now turns this system of interpretation against the communists, thus setting one closed system against another. It remains for Clurman to point out that genuinely gifted and worth-while people were found in the communist movement in years past, and that it was their immaturity which brought them into the party, and turned others into professional anti-communists. Clurman continues:

The American Communist movement among the intelligentsia always betrayed a singular lack of intelligence. And though its adherents never realized it, it hardly ever had any political meaning or weight.

It was an emotional movement which attracted to begin with all sorts of rebels against the religion of the dollar, Babbitry, and crass commercialism. The disoriented, lonely, and wounded people who felt deceived by most of their customary beliefs—or never had really developed any—were seeking a spiritual home, a faith. They yearned for substantial instead of rhetorical values, they hoped for social unity instead of anarchy, they wanted inspiration, not ballyhoo.

In this respect they were good people in the soundest American tradition. That they were usually political boobs and cultural babies did not make them any less pathetic and human than hundreds of thousands of non-Communist Americans. That some of those who joined the movement were power hungry with Führer complexes, as well as moral snobs or perverts, hardly differentiates them from many members of more orthodox political groups. That so sensitive a man as Dos Passos should have missed the

point only means that, after all these years, this is where we came in.

The dreadful thing about closed systems is that they impose upon the variety of human life the brutal pattern of uniform judgments. It was this which forced the departure of all compassion from authoritarian Christianity when the powerful priests of the Middle Ages developed the Holy Inquisition as an instrument of thought-control. Man, the Church said, was made thus and so, his hope of future life completely dependent on faith in the Church doctrine of salvation. Deviants were tortured and burned at the stake. Thus dogmas concerning the nature of man deprived man of his humanity. The communists, reacting against the closed system of religion, evolved a competing closed system with rival definitions of man and nature. And they, in their time, have become as apt at enforcing correct opinions and punishing dissenters as the Church ever was. What we may learn, however, from these terrible sequences of European history is not that dogmatic Christianity was evil, and Communism also, but that closed systems of belief make of man's inner life a naked caricature through the conformity required of it.

The real evil, however, is not in the systems, but in the tendency of human beings to want a sort of opinion which can be alleged to be "true" and maintained against objection without cost of effort. For it is this tendency which permits the growth of institutions devoted to closed systems of truth.

What will explain the tendency to go to such extremes? It is, we think, a kind of lethargy of the mind. This lethargy, writ large in political terms, becomes the atmosphere of the Washington hearings which cannot permit a man's scruples concerning "the future of civilization" to color his thinking about American policy in relation to hydrogen bombs. The man with a "nothing-but" set of beliefs never has to *think*, but simply to apply his mechanical yardsticks of truth, and of good and evil, and then deliver judgment.

Naturally enough, the "nothing-but" creeds, the closed systems of truth, invariably develop a low estimate of human beings. For the opinions of individuals cannot be important in creeds and systems designed to make thinking unnecessary, so that all but what the system has approved is condemned beforehand, without a hearing.

These are things we may learn from what is going on today, merely by looking around. So we say that the claims of philosophy have a better chance of gaining a hearing now than at any previous time in history. For philosophy proposes, in effect, that *only* the independent views of individuals have any real value in life. A second-hand truth is not even a truth, for a human being.

We have oscillated for century after century from one closed system of belief to another. Always, it has been the stimulus of philosophy, of independent thinking, which has helped us to break out of the old system, and then we have straightway betrayed our deliverer by manufacturing a new system out of the denials of the old one. Let us then study the philosophers, the men who, while they may themselves have taught some sort of system of truth, were also intent upon making men independent of any system and any teacher. Such philosophers are not easily found, or when found, may not be easy to understand. But they do exist.

REVIEW

TWO PERSPECTIVES

AGAIN we find occasion to refer to articles appearing in the fortnightly *Reporter*. Readers who are not yet acquainted with this periodical will probably appreciate knowing about two short pieces which appear in the September 23 issue. (*Reporter* is 25 cents a copy and is published at 220 East 42nd Street, New York 17.)

In a review article, "Dangerous Myths in American Diplomacy," Henry Steele Commager takes off from the general thesis of Charles Burton Marshall's *The Limits of Foreign Policy* to describe a major swing of the pendulum of public opinion:

For a quarter of a century, from 1916 to 1941, the major problem of American foreign policy was to instruct the American people about the nature of their responsibilities as citizens of a world power and persuade them to fulfill these responsibilities. In the end it was circumstances rather than logic that achieved this; Americans were not so much reasoned out of isolation and neutrality legislation as they were blasted out.

Now the pendulum has swung far to the other direction, and the most difficult problem seems to be to persuade Americans that there are limits to power, even to American power.

It is little wonder that Americans are confused about the nature of their responsibilities and their power. All other great nations have been similarly confused and few have resolved the confusion. Americans are called upon to learn in a single generation what no other people except the British ever learned, and what it took the British a century to learn. Without adequate preparation and contrary to their deepest instincts, they have been required to exercise power all over the world.

It is curiously paradoxical, as Dr. Commager points out, that the typical "isolationist" of the 1930's now has veered to the opposite extreme and recommends the extension of American power in all directions. In both cases, men of a certain temperament have oversimplified the obligations of America—first favoring isolationism because they underestimated our

influence, and now overestimating what can be done with money and superlative arms production:

What explains the swing from timidity to zeal, from an unworthy sense of weakness to an unworthy vaunting of strength? It is rooted in the American past: We have always been successful, we have always had our way and won our wars, we have always managed to find solutions, and usually material solutions, to our most vexatious problems. We have a weakness for the simple solution—in education, in social relationships, in politics, and in international relations, and we are impatient for results. It is this combination of influences that leads some of our leaders to think in slogans rather than in terms of reality.

Mr. Marshall, in *The Limits of Foreign Policy*, emphasizes the grave dangers resulting from myths which "tend to re-imagine the past." Here the process of oversimplification is carried to ridiculous extremes, and, as Dr. Commager puts it, "we tend to blame prodigious events upon little causes, in the construction of myths about the past":

Thus there are those who find almost everything they dislike the result of a conspiracy: It was Owen Lattimore who "lost" China, or perhaps the Institute of Pacific Relations; it was Alger Hiss who wrote the objectionable provisions into the charter of the United Nations; it was a group of subversives in the State Department who surrendered Poland at Yalta. We saw something of the folly of this mythmaking in the 1930's when we succumbed to the myth that Wall Street bankers and munitions manufacturers seduced us into the First World War, and that we could avoid such seductions in the future by "taking the profit out of war." Now we are engaged in creating a myth about unconditional surrender and another myth about Yalta—myths that play neatly into the hands of the most intransigent Germans.

So this Commager review; for all its brevity—and partly because of it—provides perspectives which ought to be remembered when we read "world news" as filtered through newspaper columns and editorials.

The second piece in the *Reporter* to which we wish to call attention is rather a work of art than incisive commentary. It is "The Boy in the Front

Row," by Doris Peel, who writes of what she learned about Germans and Germany through friendship with a twenty-five-year-old German youth. Kurt is a graduate of the free university in West Berlin, a native Berliner, and a teacher:

Unlike many Berliners, Kurt isn't pining to get away. He is prepared to remain where he is, without dramatizing himself as a symbol of courage, freedom, or what not. He joined the Social Democratic Party last year; the late Mayor Ernst Reuter was and still is his hero. Not only the Reuter who implacably opposed Communism, not even the humane and scholarly man, but the independent, flexible, indoctrinaire Socialist. Such a man, Kurt firmly believes, represented the answer for his country.

Though Kurt is an old habitu  of the U.S. information program's Amerikahaus, he was slow to realize how drastically at odds his own viewpoint is with both official and general American thinking about Germany—and how instantly suspect. Last January, soon after the Berlin Conference got under way, he was with me at an informal party where, as a "representative young German," he found himself interrogated by several journalists freshly arrived from the United States. It was hard to tell which of them was the more jarred: they, at learning he "wasn't for Adenauer," or he, at finding his position construed as anti-American and even pro-Communist. "But what about Reuter?" he wanted to know—still young enough to use his hero as banner and shield. For a moment or two a slight confusion reigned while one of the journalists, as if straightening him out, lauded Reuter for "symbolizing" to the world "Berlin's heroic stand against the Reds." Kurt, looking shocked, said, "But he wasn't only *against* something!" Later he asked, a little bitterly, "Then is the two-party system only for Americans? Must we Germans all vote the same way to please you?" "You'd better vote the right way, son," said an American.

A few days after this experience, Kurt invited Miss Peel to accompany him to a Hitler documentary film, "Till Five Minutes Past Zero." Readers of Dwight Macdonald's "The Responsibility of Peoples" will, we think, appreciate the pathos of what follows and perhaps understand that the Germans are often as perplexed as we are about the origins of the Nazi horrors. Miss Peel writes without attempt at

"drama," leaving it to the simple content of her story to awaken a deep response from her readers:

"Till Five Minutes Past Zero" is a poor film. Badly organized at the outset, it has been rendered still more helter-skelter by cutting and censoring . . . and was accompanied by a commentary that ranged between the obvious and the banal. But something survived. Something blazed, came through. No inadequacy in the presentation could conceal the magnitude of the catastrophe these people had been involved in, the sheer terror of the tale.

From the start the audience sat very still. One could detect only the faintest reaction now and then.

Hitler himself seemed to evoke no response. It was as if this image of him in fictive life—striding, smirking, shouting, growing grave—was being answered by a deliberate deadness of mind. Again and again a person living among the Germans comes to feel that Hitler is too much for them, too much to figure out. Perhaps for the more sensitive ones he still haunts the air as a symptom or symbol, still waiting to be explained. Not rationalized, not justified, but finally understood.

There was a tightening of attention whenever Goebbels appeared. Here, after all, was something graspable: an evil force, unambiguous, without mysticism. . . .

At the brief shots of the corpses, the gas chambers, and the ovens, there was a sudden evident intake of breath; at each performance, I was told, the same thing happened. And when the German soldiers were shown in the Russian snows, stumbling, haggard, lost-looking as the dead or stiff where they had fallen in the nightmare white, there was a further deepening of the stillness that anybody could feel. For this too touched more than a nerve; this hadn't ended. The son, the husband might still be there.

I had been told beforehand of a certain scene, the trial of those who had attempted to assassinate Hitler in July, 1944. My German friends had said, "In a way it's the worst." I watched a young man, one of prisoners, trying to speak and being howled down by something called a People's Court. These were the only German heroes in the film, these few who had tried something and failed so wretchedly, and now stood there looking as lost as the prisoners in the snow. An elderly man in front of us suddenly bowed his head; for several minutes he remained so, his hand covering his eyes during the rallies, the *heils*, the shouts of hysterical women on the screen.

Then came the inexorable closing in of the Allied armies. There was one scene toward the end during which the entire audience seemed to wince. It showed young boys in a row, little more than children, in army coats too big for them and Iron Crosses around their necks, and Hitler himself slowly moving along the line, grave, intent, stopping before each and clasping one in his arms as a father might a son. If one hadn't a notion who he was, what would one think of this worn man gazing tenderly at his little troops? What would I be thinking? And the boys themselves—not Germans, not Nazis, just very young boys hardly more than children, gazing solemnly back at him, trying hard to look big enough and brave enough. Then the quick windup, the total defeat. And now shots that were familiar from our own newsreels: Berlin from the air, when the whole city looked as if it were made of white lace, and those scenes of desperately scavenging Berliners in whom one could recognize, even at that appalling point, the hardihood that is their special mark.

I read somewhere in a West German report that people left this film without saying a word. I don't quite know what they *could* say. We too left in silence, buttoning coats, winding scarves, matter-of-factly girding ourselves for the bitter night. We walked out onto the Hohenzollerndamm and toward the corner where I live.

Kurt asked, "You noticed when I touched your arm?"

"Oh, Kurt, I'm sorry! When was it?"

"The boys," he said, "the young boys toward the end. I was the one he embraced."

COMMENTARY **PHILOSOPHICAL DARING**

To some readers, it may seem that the writer of this week's *Frontiers* article allowed himself to be carried away by an enthusiasm for ancient religion. The ruins of a Mithraic temple found in London are a slender reed for the support of so weighty a review of ancient religion, with extended side-trips into Neoplatonic philosophy.

Yet, from another point of view, a discussion of this sort once in a while seems an excellent thing to include in *MANAS*. For there is always the possibility that some at least of the ancient philosophers understood truths which the modern world has neglected. As remarked in *Children . . . and Ourselves*, the wise author of *The BhagavadGita* seems to have had a clearer grasp of the need for reflective thinking than most modern writers on education, and the psychological validity of ideas found in the *Gita* is by no means diminished by its religious or "devotional" form of discourse, even though this ancient method of instruction of "disciples" may obscure the content for some.

The thing that is bound to impress any reader of ancient scriptures is the deep conviction their authors exhibit in regard to matters that present-day scholars tend to suppose are completely speculative. Proclus, for example, writes of the soul and its migrations with the assurance of a cartographer sketching a mountain pass through which he has personally travelled. While the Neoplatonists are more daring than Plato himself, there are passages in the *Dialogues* which purport to reveal similar acquaintance with unseen realities.

What sort of men were these ancient philosophers of religion? Were they naive embellishers of inherited theologies, passing on to posterity a series of transcendental romances? The difficulty with this view of Plato and the Neoplatonists is that we find them keen and sagacious in other respects. We recognize their

common sense in practical matters and are obliged to call them great thinkers, according to such standards as we possess. Their forth-right flights into metaphysics, therefore, embarrass present-day admirers of the ancients, and the reader of modern histories of philosophy finds this aspect of Plato dealt with almost apologetically.

Just possibly, this policy toward the transcendental side of ancient thinkers is a mistake. It is our purpose, here, to invite for them a hearing without this prejudice.

CHILDREN ... and Ourselves

REMEMBERING a recent speculation here—that one effective means of gaining attention in an educational debate is to maintain a position framed in extreme terms—we now propose that the only education worth talking about is education in meditation. Meditation—the word "contemplation" might be used instead, but it doesn't sound sufficiently "extreme"—is spoken of by ancient Eastern philosophers as the ability, first, to detach oneself from any object of desire or subject of fear, and, second, to identify oneself at will with any idea or person into whose essential meaning or being one wishes to enter.

Education connotes a broadening of understanding, and unless one is free from obsessing fears, intelligence is paralyzed, so that no "broadening" can take place.

We all encounter fears, and so do children, but there are two major ways of reacting to them. The first and most familiar reaction is to try to run away from them, or to pretend they aren't there (some call this religion), and both amount to the same thing. The other and better alternative is to stand and fight fears on the spot—which means to recognize them in meditation, reflect upon them fully, and finally to dwell upon the fact that, whatever else we are, we are always more and something stronger than our fears.

The man who meditates is the man who has learned to live with himself—all by himself, if necessary. He is not, in David Riesman's phrase, "other-directed," because the important thing to him is to be able to choose for himself when issues of value arise. The man of meditation, furthermore, has learned something very few educators and practically no politicians have ever learned—how to be quiet for a time, so that when speech is essayed there is a fair certainty that something worth saying will result.

The man of meditation is not, as some might suppose, a man of conventional religion. He *couldn't* be, really, since conventional religion is essentially a promised way to quick spiritual riches. Meditation is the long, hard way to riches of the spirit—so long a way that most men are overcome by laziness and accept the comforting assurance from religion that so much thought is not necessary. After all, when the answers to all questions of morals and values are clearly written down, or when they can be declared by Popes or from pulpits, what need is there for puzzled inner struggles pursued in solitude? Of course, some men of religion intimate that they are good at meditation, but we have never been able to believe them, the reason being that a true man of meditation, though very sure of just who and why he is, remains uncertain about final answers. Typical men of religion clearly believe themselves to have the answers, not only for themselves, but for others, as well; so that "prayer" seems a better word for their times of solitude. A prayer that one might be able to continue to have intelligent doubts would be a fine prayer, but to make this kind of prayer one would have to have the courage of a man of meditation. And for the man of courage, prayer may be unnecessary.

Before we get entirely carried away by these interesting possibilities, some attempt should be made to relate all this to children. Well, the most fortunate children, we think, are those who have men or women of meditation for parents. Such children grow up with the example of independent judgment before their eyes, and, because there is something in everyone, young or old, which responds to the example of independent judgment, these children have a good chance of turning out to be "autonomous," to borrow another of Riesman's terms.

At this point, however, a distinction needs to be noted, one which throws considerable light on the question of "radicalism" vs. "conservatism." The man of meditation is a true radical because he insists upon probing to the roots of any matter

which calls for action, or the roots of any idea which calls for a voicing of his opinion. But the merely rebellious person is not a true radical—because the man who rebels by constitutional inclination, or "conditioning," rather than for the sake of some principle, never stops to think. Neither does the "reactionary"—an apt term, by the way, for one who does not stop to ponder anything in his blind defense of *status quo*. The true conservative who needn't be a different sort of person, or even a different person, from the radical—can also be, and should be, a man of meditation.

For the child, the example of the man of meditation, whether he be classed as radical or conservative by his neighbors, will lie in the fact that every important question is treated by him as a fit subject for quiet, devoted thought. The "quiet" may take but the fraction of a second, or it may take a long time; but in either case its distinguishing mark will be in the feeling or mood generated. For the sake of discovering the truth of any matter, the man of meditation will be willing and able to extricate his mind from purely personal bias. The teacher of *The Bhagavad-Gita* defines "the man of meditation" in this way, showing that the ancients were more aware of the need for mental discipline than most moderns:

A man is said to be confirmed in spiritual knowledge when in every condition he receives each event, whether favorable or unfavorable, with an equal mind which neither likes nor dislikes . . . his wisdom is established, and, having met good or evil, neither rejoiceth at the one nor is cast down by the other. He is confirmed in spiritual knowledge, when, like the tortoise, he can draw in all his senses and restrain them from their wonted purposes. The hungry man loseth sight of every other object but the gratification of his appetite. The tumultuous senses and organs hurry away by force the heart even of the wise man who striveth after perfection. Let a man, restraining all these, remain in devotion at rest in his true self; for he who has his senses and organs in control possesses spiritual knowledge.

The man of meditation, or the child or youth of meditation, knows how to shut out the noise of

the world at necessary intervals. What a fine ability this is! As Erich Fromm remarked in his *Forgotten Language*, it may be that the "true self" is hidden most of the time, and is more apt to be revealed through dreams than when all of the pressures of tumultuous circumstance close in and over our consciousness during waking hours. This because, as many psychologists besides Dr. Fromm now inform us, it is now customary to believe that "adjustment" to the *status quo* is a good and necessary thing. The values of *non-conformity* are obscure to people who rely upon statistical studies for their conceptions of the nature of things. In any case, if the "real self"—that is, the genuine promptings of the soul—can wondrously speak to us in dreams, how much more wonderful must it be to establish contact of this sort during everyday existence! Such a consummation, presumably, is what meditation is really for. And if there is a "true self" to be discovered, it is certain that the way to it must lead through periods of deliberate mental solitude.

How does one help children to grow into men and women "of meditation"? First, by appreciating the importance of philosophy and psychology as means to a cosmopolitan breadth of mind. Meditation, like everything else, needs an ever-broadening base to give its wonders scope. Gautama Buddha, who was a very great man of meditation, counselled his disciples against narrowing their mental purview to a single set of sectarian teachings. So the extremists who make of contemplation an end in itself do not represent what we have in mind. Meditation should be an art in philosophy, not a technique of religion; as such, it might have more appeal for our children than we immediately realize. It might, that is, if we could only learn to practice it ourselves!

FRONTIERS

Philosophical Religion

"SOME old-fashioned individualistic Socialists," *Time* (Oct. 4) relates, hearing that the temple of Mithras, recently unearthed in a war-torn section of London, was to be covered by a fourteen-story structure, went home to write letters of protest. They wanted more opportunity to examine the ancient ruin, and felt that the intention to erect a "temple of Mammon" (office building) on the site was being pursued with vulgar haste. Accordingly, with London newspapers endorsing the complaint, the owners of the land, *Time* reports, agreed to wait a decent interval.

The religion of Mithraism, however, which was spread throughout Europe by the Roman soldiers, is of more than antiquarian interest. The parallels of this faith with Christian belief are notable, it being likely that several of the Christian symbols and forms of worship were either borrowed from the devotees of Mithra, or from other of the ancient mystery religions. *Time* recalls that Mithra was born miraculously (from a rock), that he served human beings as a redeemer, that gift-bearing shepherds were present at his nativity, and that after trials and adversities, he ascended to Heaven, as Elijah or Jesus is said to have risen. Mithraism even taught immortality of the soul.

It was the Phrygian cap on the head of a finely carved head which told the digging archaeologist of the London Museum that the temple had been devoted to Mithra, the patron of the Roman soldiers. For in the Mithraic chapels in other parts of the world, Mithra is portrayed as a handsome youth wearing the Phrygian cap of liberty, and carrying in one hand a knife, in the other a torch, the latter symbolizing the light he brings to the world. What little is known of Mithraic religion has been learned from these paintings, or from scattered references in ancient pagan and Christian sources. The Mithraists underwent initiation in secrecy, and except for fragmentary records, we do not know what they really taught in their mysteries.

One thing, however, seems plain. Mithraism was a religion of courage and moral self-reliance. While it included such rites as baptism and communion—the latter being representative of a "last supper" taken by Mithra with his close companions—there were distinctive differences, so far as Christian belief is concerned. Mithra was the strong God of Light and truth—a true sun-god. By invoking Mithra, the aspirant called upon the help of an invincible power. December 25, later selected by Christians for the celebration of the birth of Christ, was the Day of *Sol Invictus* for the Mithraists. In a study of the mystery religions, *Pagan Regeneration*, Harold R. Willoughby remarks:

. . . certain features of the Mithraic ideal stand out with clarity. Primarily, it was an ideal of perfect purity. The ritual prescribed repeated ablutions and purifications and these were intended to wash away the stains of sin. The very conformity of ritual practice at this point shows a sensitiveness to moral turpitude. The Mithraic life was also one of steady self-control and of asceticism even. Rigorous fasts and abstinences were enjoyed, and continence was encouraged as a special virtue. More broadly, the resistance of all sensuality was a mark of the Mithraist. Chiefly, however, the Mithraic life was characterized by militant virtue. . . .

According to the picture suggested by the Emperor Julian, Mithra was also the guide who assisted the soul on its heavenly journey and, finally, like a fond father, welcomed the soul to its heavenly home. . . . As the soul passed from one sphere to another, it cast aside various earthly impurities and desires like different garments and finally, purified of all vice, it entered the empyrean, there to enjoy eternal bliss. In addition to this general hope of immortality, more or less vague in character, certain Mithraic circles cherished a vivid eschatology involving a return of Mithra to earth, a bodily resurrection of the dead, the destruction of the wicked, and the rejuvenation of the universe. Whatever the particular form of the hope, the Mithraic initiate felt a calm assurance regarding the future.

The thing that is particularly interesting about this and other accounts of the Mithraic religion is the broad outline that is sketched of archaic religion. Here are elements of symbolism which may even throw a clear light on certain aspects of Christian

belief, removing them from the intolerable category of "uniqueness," and placing them beside similar and more philosophically expressed insights of the ancients. Legge, in *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity*, discusses the two signs of the Zodiac which are worn by Mithra, suggesting that they represent what the astrologers of the time called the *Porta laboris* and *Janua Ditis*, denoting the door to life, through which man is "born to labor," and the "gate of Hades," by which he leaves mortal existence. "If," Legge remarks, "as Porphyry says, the doctrine of metempsychosis formed part of the Mithraic teaching, the keys [Zodiacal signs] would thus have a meaning analogous to the Orphic release from 'the wheel.'" A Mithraic liturgy found by a German scholar shows the neophyte anticipating the transfiguration brought by the rebirth of initiation:

O! first genesis of my genesis! First beginning of my beginning! First spirit of the spirit that is within me! . . . May it please thee to translate me, who am trammelled by the nature which underlies me, to an immortal genesis. . . . that I may be born again in spirit; that I may be initiated, and the sacred Spirit may breathe on me!

The liturgy concludes with a feeling of exaltation:

O Lord, having been born again, I die! Having increased and again increasing, I come to an end by life-begotten birth, and coming into existence, and having been released unto death, I pursue my way, as thou hast ordered from the beginning, as thou hast ordained. And having accomplished the mystery, I am *Pheroara miouri*.

Legge is inclined to think that—

. . . the concluding words given above confirm the view that the Mithraists, like the Orphics before them, taught the metempsychosis or reincarnation of souls. Did the Mithraist think that his soul, when released from this "dread necessity," finally escaped from even the planetary spheres and, raising itself into the heaven of the fixed stars, became united with the Deity himself? We can only ask the question without being able to suggest an answer supported by any evidence.

Whatever answer we accept, it now begins to be clear that there was a profound kinship among the ancient religions of India, Persia, Greece, and Rome. *The BhagavadGita* is filled with the counsels of the

teacher concerning how to win release from the dreary round of rebirths—the cycle of necessity. The Orphic mysteries offered the discipline of purifications toward the same liberating end. Gnostic hymns of primitive Christianity mourn the soul's loss of its original purity, and express a longing for return to a state of blessedness. The Neoplatonists were less allegorical in their teachings about the cycle of rebirth—more metaphysically specific. As Proclus, the great codifier of Neoplatonism, wrote in his *Elements of Theology*:

The vehicle of every particular soul descends by the addition of vestures increasingly material; and ascends in company with the soul through divestment of all that is material and recovery of its proper form, after the analogy of the soul which makes use of it: for the soul descends by the acquisition of the irrational principles of life; and ascends by putting off all those faculties tending to temporal process with which it was invested in its descent, and becoming dean and bare of all such faculties as serve the use of the process. (Dodds translation, Oxford, 1933, p. 183.)

Plotinus, perhaps the greatest of the Neoplatonic thinkers who wrote at any length, says in the fourth *Ennead*: "The souls peering forth from the intellectual Realm descend first to the heavens and there put on a body; this becomes at once the medium by which they reach more and more towards magnitude (physical extension) and proceed to bodies progressively more earthy." Elsewhere Plotinus argues against the implication of the Aristotelian doctrine of entelechy, that the soul is dependent upon the body for its existence. If, he says, soul and body were but different aspects of the same thing, there could be sense perception but no intellection. The Plotinian argument for the existence of an independent moral agent which uses the body is fundamentally the same as that of modern idealists who contend against the claims of the Behaviorists. If we assume that body and soul are really one, Plotinus points out, "there is an end to the resistance offered by reason to the desires; the total (of body and Entelechy-Soul) must have one uniform experience, and be aware of no internal contradiction. . . . The very upholders of the entelechy are thus compelled to introduce another

soul, the Intellect, to which they ascribe immortality." Plotinus concludes his discussion:

The substantial existence of the soul, then, does not depend upon serving as Form to anything; it is an Essence which does not come into being by finding a seat in body; it exists before it becomes also the soul of some particular, for example, of a living being, whose body by this {Aristotle's} doctrine would be the author of its soul.

What, then, is the soul's Being? If it is neither body nor a state nor experience of body, but it is act and creation; if it holds much and gives much, and is an existence outside of body; of what order and character must it be?

Clearly, it is what we describe as Veritable Essence. The other order, the entire corporeal Kind, is process; it appears and it perishes; in reality it never possesses Being, but is merely protected, in so far as it has the capacity, by participating in what authentically is.

The development of the idea of the soul in Neoplatonic writings bears on the question of the Mithraic teachings for the reason that the Neoplatonists deliberately set out to "rationalize" the ancient mystery religions. What had been myth, sacred drama, and allegory in the Mysteries became metaphysics in Plato and the Neoplatonists. As Mosheim says of Ammonius Saccas, the founder of the Neoplatonic school: "Conceiving that not only the philosophers of Greece, but also all those of the different barbarian nations, were perfectly in unison with each other with regard to every essential point, he made it his business to expound the thousand tenets of all these various sects as to show they had all originated from one and the same source, and tended all to one and the same end." The Neoplatonists regarded the myths of the ancients, Harnack observes in his *History of Dogma* (Vol. I), "as the proper material and sure foundation of philosophy." This distinguished historian of religion continues:

A rehabilitation of all ancient religions is aimed at (see the philosophic teachers of Julian and compare his great religious experiment); each was to continue in its traditional form, but at the same time each was to communicate the religious temper and the religious knowledge which Neoplatonism had attained, and each cultus is to lead to the high morality which it

behooves man to maintain. In Neoplatonism the psychological fact of the longing of man for something higher, is exalted to the all-dominating principle which explains the world. Therefore the religions, though they are to be purified and spiritualized, become the foundation of philosophy.

The Emperor Julian's attempt to revive ancient religion in more philosophic form is perhaps a good illustration of this broad tendency, since Julian was himself a Mithraist who sought to add the philosophic content of Neoplatonism to this traditional Roman religion. Julian recalled from exile the heresiarchs whom the Christian emperors had banished, yet insisted upon equal toleration for all sects of Jews and Christians. The objective of the Neoplatonists was to purify, not to replace, the various religions of the time. As Harnack says of Porphyry, the disciple of Plotinus:

During the course of his life Porphyry warned men more and more decidedly against crude popular beliefs and immoral cults. "The ordinary notions of the Deity are of such a kind that it is more godless to share them than to neglect the images of the gods." But freely as he criticised the popular religions, he did not wish to give them up. He contended for a pure worship of the many gods, and recognised the right of every old national religion, and the religious duties of their professors. His work against the Christians is not directed against Christ, or what he regarded as the teaching of Christ, but against the Christians of his day, and against the sacred books which, according to Porphyry, were written by impostors and ignorant people. In his acute criticism of the genesis of what was regarded as Christianity in his day, he spoke bitter and earnest truths, and therefore acquired the name of the fiercest and most formidable of all the enemies of Christians. . . . The Neoplatonists themselves described the ecclesiastical theologians as intruders who appropriated Greek philosophy, but mixed it with foreign fables. Hence Porphyry said of Origen: "The outer life of Origen was that of a Christian and opposed to the law; but, in regard to his views of things and of the Deity, he thought like the Greeks, inasmuch as he introduced their ideas into the myths of other peoples." This judgment of Porphyry is at any rate more just and appropriate than that of the Church theologians about Greek philosophy, that it had stolen all its really valuable doctrines from the ancient sacred writings of the Christians.

The truth of the matter is, as Harnack remarks, that Catholic Christianity and Catholic theology "conquered Neoplatonism after it had assimilated nearly everything it possessed." Renan has observed that "if Christianity had been arrested in its growth by some mortal malady, the world itself would have become Mithraistic." If this be true, which seems not unreasonable, then the triumph of Mithraism would doubtless have been in a refined version, filtered through the philosophic screen of Neoplatonic criticism and metaphysics. As it is, Christian mysticism is almost entirely of Neoplatonic origin—as found in Augustine, Erigena, and Meister Eckhart—and Troeltsch, an eminent historiographer, has remarked that "even in the future Christian philosophy must continue to be largely Plotinian."

Harnack goes so far as to say that only the doctrines relating to the incarnation of Christ as the son of God, to the resurrection of the flesh, and the creation of the word, separate early Christian views from the Neoplatonic system: "In all else ecclesiastical theologians and Neoplatonists approximated so closely that many among them were completely at one." He adds.

If in any writing the doctrines just named are not referred to, it is often doubtful whether it was composed by a Christian or a Neoplatonist. Above all, the ethical rules the precepts of the right life, that is asceticism, were always similar. Here Neoplatonism in the end celebrated its greatest triumph. It introduced into the Church its entire mysticism, its mystic exercises, and even the magical ceremonies as expounded by Iamblichus.

Harnack ends by pointing out that it was Neoplatonic influence, also, which led in the Renaissance to the observation of nature and gave the impulse for the rise of modern science:

Consequently, in the history of science, Neoplatonism has attained a significance and performed services of which men like Iamblichus and Proclus never dreamed. In point of fact, actual history is often more wonderful and capricious than legends and fables.

The difference, then, between the Hellenism of the declining Roman empire and the Christian faith which replaced it, lay in Christian reliance on God as creator and his son as savior, whereas, for the

Mithraic Hellenists, the soul pre-existed as an independent spirit, having to work out its own salvation through the fulfillment of duties and disciplines. By the Greeks and other ancients, Christ could be taken as a symbol of the Logos, or reason governing the cosmos—the principle of a new life which is holy and divine, but *natural*—whereas in Judaic Christianity, the idea of the Son has little if any cosmic content—he is an anthropomorphic offspring of an anthropomorphic father, and he brings salvation through his vicarious atonement. It was this conflict between the philosophic idea of the "son" acceptable to the Greeks and the wholly dogmatic claims of the non-Hellenic Christians which led to the endless controversies which have raged through Christian history concerning the "nature" of Jesus Christ.

What emerges from all this is a clear line of Western thought in the direction of philosophizing ancient allegory—a line which was broken by the anthropomorphism of Christianity, and then resumed by individual heretics and speculative philosophers from ancient times until the present. The old gods like Mithra and others may be regarded as deities whose evolution into metaphysical principles or natural forces was frustrated by the dogmas of the Church, this frustration being later enforced by political authority and eventually by the brutal persecutions carried on by the guardians of orthodoxy. The beautiful head of Mithra, then, but lately exposed beneath the rubble of war-blitzed London, may remind us of the moral confusions of the past, through which the noble gods of antiquity have been lost to memory.