

A GOOD HUMAN LIFE

A LETTER from a reader, commenting on the article, "From History to Metaphysics," raises various questions, some of them leading to profoundly important and unsettled issues. This reader writes:

In MANAS for March 2 there was a discussion concerning how the Romans and the Chinese lacked knowledge and therefore found themselves at war. MANAS then goes on to suggest that citizens of the United States do not read a certain author and therefore are unlikely to have an intelligent opinion on the war in Vietnam.

The assumption made in these arguments is that lack of information is the cause of wrong or pain-producing acts. Without invoking the Buddhist notion that sin and evil come out of ignorance, there remains the fact that many politicians and administrators knowingly carry out socially destructive policies. Further, two men may be equally well-informed yet support different policies.

If I do not like my opponent's policy, I do not think it is fair to call him ignorant or, as is the current custom, mentally disturbed. There are genuine differences of opinion which reflect values held by a person. If I enslave you, do I act out of ignorance or personal callousness? To argue that in terms of some moral cause-effect law (such as Emerson's Law of Compensation) there will arise evil conditions as effects of the immoral act of slavery (such as the Civil War or racial tensions), does not get to the core of the problem. Perhaps the realization of this led Socrates to devise a dialectic that forces the issue "back into" a personal frame of reference where a quiet confrontation of self and issue will result.

Although the new, existentially-oriented psychotherapy purports to do the same (stating that the individual is responsible), how can I really be responsible in a conflict of impersonal, devaluated forces?

A *real* conflict comes out of a commitment. The reason why a society cannot love is because its metaphysics undermine the very notion of a simple act of faith, and what is love but an act of faith?

Modern mathematics made rapid advancement after it attempted to construct systems whose elements were symbols devoid of meaning and which gained significance only in terms of abstract relationships. Has not even the most enlightened kind of psychological thinking fallen victim to this emptiness, using a terminology which on the surface is personalistic but underneath is based on assumptions which, like abstract mathematics, assign no meanings to the elements dealt with. Such things as "positive" or "negative" feelings are noted, but the symbol, "feeling," remains undefined.

While it is fair to say, first, that there is some obscurity in this letter, we hardly have reason to complain about it, since the obscurity clouds areas where no one has much certainty. However, it seems pertinent to point out that in his last paragraph, our correspondent may have blurred the distinction between the contentless abstractions of mathematics and the undefined primary assumptions which are inevitable in all value-involved thought. That is, in every value-bearing proposition there is a subjective component which can only be asserted, or defined in terms of itself, rather than objectively justified. (This view, if not self-evident, may be explored by a reading of Michael Polanyi's book, *Personal Knowledge*.)

Turning, then, to the first objection of this reader, there is the claim that some men (politicians or administrators) knowingly pursue destructive policies. His point is that if men knowingly do evil, what value remains in spreading correct information about the causes of war?

We must note at once the devastating consequences of the assumption on which this objection is based. There is ample reason to argue that even if there is some truth in the assumption, we cannot afford to make it. Being human, or remaining human, involves certain risks.

The proposition is that some men are immovably fixed in consciously evil intentions. Obviously, we cannot say that *all* men are of this sort, since that would destroy the basis of all educational activity and all hope of self-government. If we say that some men nonetheless are intrinsically evil by nature (not open to a contrary persuasion), then it becomes the responsibility of the good men to purge the world of the bad men, or at least to render them harmless by confining or disarming them.

Now this is a familiar, time-honored view. It was the moral basis of the crusades launched by Urban II. To arouse European chivalry to wrest Jerusalem from its Moslem masters, this pope called upon Christian knights to cleanse the world of a breed of pagan fiends:

An accursed race . . . estranged from God . . .
Even now the Turks are torturing Christians. . . .
Yea, I speak now with the voice of the prophet, "*Arm thyself, O mighty one!*" Take up your arms, valiant sons, and go. Better fall in battle than live to see the sorrow of your people and the desecration of your holy places. (Harold Lamb, *The Crusaders*.)

Modern wars of extermination have not been essentially different in their emotional ground. The exhortation to eliminate the godless Communists is an expression of the same evil-men theory; and likewise the Communist resolve to liquidate all capitalist exploiters. Justification for wiping out the Communists has its emotional support, for many, as a defense of supernatural religion, while the revolutionary wrath of the Communists is somehow derived from the materialistic dialectic, which obtains an authority equivalent to Revelation by claiming to represent the Laws of Nature.

Obviously, we must be very careful about making assumptions concerning men who are said to do evil (carry out "socially destructive policies") knowingly. Almost inevitably, such assumptions establish what Richard Hofstadter has named the paranoid style in politics, which will only prepare the world for some final nihilistic confrontation in which *all* the contestants regard

themselves as the righteous defenders of freedom and justice against manifest powers of evil.

It follows from the foregoing, and is democratically unavoidable, that for both political and educational purposes we must adopt what our correspondent calls a "Buddhist notion," which we would identify as a Socratic maxim: No man *knowingly* does evil. The reason for assuming this, even arbitrarily, is that both education and democratic politics found their hope on a favorable judgment, *in principle*, of human potentiality.

This is a practical view. It may also be a metaphysical view, as it is in Buddhism and Platonism. Without attempting to explain away the "mystery of evil" in a syllogism, we may say that men who do what seems unmistakable evil are persons who have a warped idea of themselves and their good. In spite of our correspondent's contention that it is "not fair," we suggest that the paranoid style in politics does indeed result from distorted thinking about human nature and human good, and we use for illustration the claims of the Nazis. We would urge, further, that the inventors and perpetrators of Nazi "philosophy" and practice were both ignorant and mentally unbalanced men—a view which, "fair" or "unfair," seems more constructive than calling them innately and irredeemably evil. Nor need this view depend upon the assertion that we are ourselves totally righteous and sane.

For present purposes we define good politics as that system of human arrangements by which we attempt to make necessary and practical decisions about our relationships with one another such that we do the least harm to each other, despite our admitted common ignorance about final good. Politics here obviously means democratic politics, since authoritarian politics could not confess to any such ignorance, but would insist upon legislating the path to a preconceived ideal condition.

It should be plain enough that both democratic politics and authoritarian politics are

founded on metaphysical ideas. Authoritarian politics obtains its dogmatic certainty from unprovable assertions about the nature of man and human good—such as, for example, that faith in a particular religious creed will bring the believer to eternal bliss after death, thereby justifying the punishment and slaughter of unbelievers who might pervert innocents from the one saving doctrine; or, such as the claim that the construction of the correct social environment will inevitably produce good and decent beings, making it mandatory to liquidate by any means available those who stand in the way of the revolutionary necessities for creating that environment. Since these are absolutely decisive views concerning the nature of man, they are properly called metaphysical, even though, in our experience, they appear more familiarly as theological or ideological conceptions.

The metaphysical foundations of democratic politics tend to be more obscure for the reason that its assumptions are usually formulated in a context of rebellion against tyrannical politics, and in order to avoid the slightest hint of authoritarian compulsion democratic politics often claims to be wholly free of the "taint" of metaphysics. This is of course ridiculous, even if the claim is understandable in the light of history. As a means of hiding any reference to its metaphysical origins, there is in democratic politics a great display of fidelity to trial-and-error methods, assertion of empirical tough-mindedness, and declarations of atomistic, reductive theories of "reality"—all in behalf of keeping down tyranny and promising as much freedom as possible for the individual. Instead of identifying this valuation of the individual as a metaphysical assumption about the *nature* of the human individual, there is stress on the rhetoric of "freedom" as the highest good, a value which quite naturally has intuitive acceptance from everyone but displaced authoritarians. The fact of the matter, however, is that democratic politics, or the politics of human freedom, is squarely founded on the judgment of man as a self-developing, learning intelligence

whose good cannot be served in any way except by contributing to his learning, self-development, and capacity for independent decision as to his values in life. This is a metaphysical assumption about man. It appears first in Western thought in the Platonic doctrine that the soul is the motion which moves itself; and is repeated by Pico della Mirandola in the fifteenth century, in a superficially Christian context, in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

There is a paradoxical, gnostic-agnostic flavor in the metaphysics required by democratic politics, and considerable discipline is involved in maintaining this position, to keep from sliding into some form of authoritarian compromise. What seems wholly evident is the fact that unless the people of a democratic society continually remind themselves of the interdependent relation between freedom and uncertainty, and continually reinforce their metaphysic with reflection on the learning, self-developing nature of man, democratic politics loses its moral foundation and is slowly transformed into an authoritarian system which retains of democratic practice only its symbols and slogans.

Now since democratic politics was in its origin not conceived as a path to the highest good, but had a minimum-of-harm criterion of excellence (the best government is the least government), it is a fundamental distortion of the democratic idea to convert it into the basis of the welfare state. The good-government-by-least-government idea cannot survive evolution into justification of the welfare state. Too many actual uncertainties have to be resolved by the authority of the moral emotions alone for the honest uncertainty of the original democratic spirit to be maintained. Instead, the stress comes to be on some hopeful version of the material conditions of the good life for all, to be provided through the increasing power and resources of the state. This amounts, for many people, to a politicalization of their thinking about the attainment of the good of man, and such thinking has a natural reluctance to

admit the limitations along with the possibilities of the political process. This is not to suggest that there have not been compelling humanitarian reasons for the development of both the fact and the psychology of the welfare state, but to point to the inevitable consequences for democracy in this development.

In another portion of his letter, our correspondent points out that Socrates was able to frame the problem of right conduct as a personal issue and he remarks that existentially-oriented psychotherapists contend that the individual is "responsible"—but, he asks, "how can I really be responsible in a conflict of impersonal, devaluated forces?"

So far as we know, the point of "reality therapy" in relation to responsibility is that no healing can take place until the individual *accepts* responsibility for his condition and stops expecting others to solve his problems. This, you might say, is an empirically determined fact—something that is true whether or not you choose to support it with a metaphysic, as Socrates might have done, and perhaps did, in the Myth of Er. Whatever a man's past, he can never become whole without accepting responsibility for his own wholeness, and, moreover, he can't really become whole without showing concern for the wholeness of others. His wholeness may indeed be an individual achievement, but it is realized in an interpersonal and social context. In this sense, we are all endlessly in debt to one another. A teacher, for example, is a grown-up, and as a human being has at least that much wholeness. But the teacher devotes himself to the needs of children. There is a sense in which the teacher "takes on" the immaturities of the children he teaches, even though they are not his own. By this means he enriches both the children and himself. It is simply a fact of universal experience that persons who have devoted themselves throughout their lives to the growth-needs of others are rare human beings in whose company we delight.

So with a man who finds himself unwillingly entangled in "a conflict of impersonal, devaluated forces." He has not, perhaps, been personally responsible for even the smallest part of this conflict, yet he does what he can to bring it to an end. He *assumes* this responsibility as an act more natural to him than opting out of the situation, supposing this to be possible.

In these terms, you could argue that a man's responsibility is not a matter of technical measurement, except according to a legal convention, but, humanly speaking, is a function of his radius as a man. A public-spirited man may not be author of the human condition in his time, but he may try to make himself responsible for it just the same.

Here, in very plain terms, is the difference between the criterion of the good in truly human life and the criterion in political life. In human life, the good is what a man can *give*; under the political rule, it is what can be justly *exacted*. It is the hope of present-day utopians that they will be able to overcome the odium of "exacting" what seems to be needed for a perfect or at least adequate material endowment of society by means of the miracle of cybernation. This will probably be the last historical attempt to substitute technique for a better quality in human beings in order to get a good society.

A great deal of the obscurity in all such problems, it seems to us, flows from our methods of diagnosis, which are essentially *social*. The problems of men cease to be human problems, losing thereby the human criterion of the good, and are defined as social problems, acquiring thereby the political criterion, simply because there are so many of us, and because a respectable quantitative analysis can be done of a lot of people massed together. It seems practically certain that by objectifying our problems in this way, we make them (or the most important of them) *inaccessible* to real (human) solution.

Harold Rosenberg has a good passage on this situation in the last chapter of his *Tradition of the New* (Horizon, 1959):

The charge that all our social behavior stands as a power over and against us *is a more extreme accusation of existing American society than that of the preceding radicalism*. Implicating *everyone*, without distinction as to social class or function, in a single deepening process of dehumanization, such works as *The Lonely Crowd*, *The Organization Man*, *The Hidden Persuaders*, communicate in atmosphere, if not in stated concept, the sinister overtones of a developing totalitarianism from which there is no escape. In this literature with its subdued manners of scientific analysis Orwell keeps springing up like a red devil. *The Hidden Persuaders* features Big Brother on the jacket and promises the reader "a slightly chilly feeling along the spine"; an effect which the blurb for Whyte's volume has already delivered through billing its hero as the man who "not only works for the Organization: he belongs to it." . . . With Marx the conversion of the individual's "living time" into lifeless commodities was restricted to the routine of the wage worker. In the current studies no one who participates in any capacity in the system of production and distribution can escape the vampire that drains him of himself. Differences in class functions have ceased to matter. Even the division between labor and leisure has lost its meaning, for the psychic mortification of the individual takes place not only in and through his work but by means of his participation in any form, public or private, of social life, from churchgoing, to cocktail parties, to his relations with his wife and children. . . . All our authors are at one in conceiving the flattening of personality in America as a universal effect of our interrelated economic and social practices. . . .

Here "scientific objectivity" has become the disguise of a philosophy of fatalism. The emergence of the Orgman is conceived in terms far more deterministic than those of the "historical materialists." . . . In any case, the histrionic effect of the new criticism is unmistakable: the bland deadpan of the Objective Observer has definitely replaced the scowl of the radical accuser. For him such words as "capitalist," "class conflict," "profits," "depression" are at once too bulky and needlessly exciting. Since they draw from the same storehouse of material and cultural consumers' goods, all Americans have become "capitalists"; since they are changed into directed beings by their work and social consumption,

all have become "proletarianized." On both counts, there is no cause for conflict and a unanimity of interest prevails. All of us Whyte thinks, will have to revolt. But whatever basis there was for Marx's conception of a metaphysico-political uprising of human machine parts against a minority of opulent personalities has vanished in the universal estrangement.

This is indeed exactly what happens to us when we estimate our personal responsibility according to the abstractions of our political system and at the same time rely upon the scientific method to describe what has gone wrong. Our methods of diagnosis, since they involve objectification and then generalization, put before us a totally hopeless plight, since they tell us what is being done to us without our knowledge and beyond our control; and there is no longer an "enemy," or anyone to blame with old-fashioned indignation. Our trouble is the System, and you can hardly punish *that*. Our methods of cure, which are economic and political, can contemplate only fresh manipulations of the very factors—in terms, again, of the abstractions of "objective analysis"—which have created the terrible façades the diagnosticians describe. The entire approach is ridiculous.

These abstractions concern only our degradations, *not our humanity*. Our lives are *not* totally absorbed in all these disgusting things. The disgusting profile is there, and all the "figures" are no doubt correct, but when we read the reports, almost automatically we think of all those *other* people who are trapped by their meaningless lives, while *we* are still smart enough to outwit the system. But the only way to *change* the system is through gradually altering our lives so that the demands made upon it are different, and it will no longer develop as we have made it develop in the past.

The only way to free ourselves from a system which has become overpowering from being given too much importance is by ignoring it. Tinkering with it won't help, and total revolution would be total insanity. If a nation of people finds itself

enslaved because it is a nation of "consumers," there must be a way of consuming that will not enslave them. This is not a production problem or a distribution problem; it is a *consumers'* problem. How would a change in the techniques of the economy free them from their problem? If they have become less than human beings ought to be, why should they blame the System? Finding scapegoats as a substitute for accepting responsibility for being human has *never* made anyone into a better man. Accepting responsibility has meant political revolution, from time to time, in the past, but that obviously won't work any more. The problem is no longer political, except for those who, by reason of skin-color or other deviations from the image of ideal, righteous, and deserving consumers, have been pushed to one side. The point is that the people who have full human initiative haven't been using their opportunities to *be* human. This makes them greedy, selfish, and indifferent to the rest of the human race.

There is a vast difference between the definition of the problems of people who as individuals are determined to act as human beings, and the definition of the problems of people who haven't even considered this option. A good society has not the slightest chance of coming into being without an awareness of this difference, as a crucial factor affecting all planning that is seriously concerned with a good human life.

REVIEW

YOUTHFUL "OUTSIDERS"

JOHN KNOWLES' *A Separate Peace*, a first novel by a very young author, was a lucid description of the psychological transitions experienced by boys who are just beginning to realize that they are "outsiders"—that the accepted patterns of the world they are about to enter promise a despair far worse than adolescent confusions. Other books carry something of Knowles' perception—one being *Drive, He Said*, by Jeremy Lamer (Dell, 1966). Mr. Lamer's contemporary Hamlet is a young basketball star, Hector Bloom, who finds release from many tensions by athletic prowess, but who realizes that his fame and the fortune it may possibly provide will bring him no closer to "belonging." These thoughts pass through Hector's mind as he awaits the opening of a decisive intercollegiate contest:

Every six hours the American satellite came from the underbelly of the globe and buzzed over the Island, movie-making. And now word came that the Enemy had a satellite up there, too, crossing the path of ours and spying on us! "Take down your spheroid of aggression or we will blast it from the Free World's atmosphere!" A peaceful people, Americans would nevertheless uphold their tradition of courage. . . .

So far America was not involved. Nor was the Enemy. There had been no direct contact between satellites or between our observers and their instructors. Our leaders had taken a firm line. "We must not fight from fear, but neither must we fear from fight." To which the Enemy replied with a bluff: "To plug in our thermal heat bomb and burn the world to a cinder would be ashes in our mouth; nonetheless we cannot shrink from our commitments."

All over the world good citizens held their breath, prayed to God and prepared themselves to stand up and go down for the vindication of right. Even at a small university upstate along the Hudson from New York City the crisis was felt. The thought of men dying had utterly unstrung young Hector Bloom. He had taken himself into a dream from which he couldn't wake, a dream of obligation and striving.

Hector's experiences in the games were microcosmic versions of the adult delusion that "manhood" grows out of the contestant's view of meaning. The following is not merely a contemptuous comment on athletics, but reflects on the way so many people regard life—as a series of crises between "enemies." This is what Hector is beginning to understand:

Our national anthem. Fighting Coach Jack Bullion took him in his heartfelt arms. "We're counting on you, Big Hector. Don't let us down." *Lead our alliance. Put down the others.* His teammates crowded around Hector, some of them taller than he, pressing and patting. "Let's go to it, baby! You can do it, kid! Play 'em rough, Big Hector!" *We will fight them on the beaches.* Luther Nixon, student manager, towelled off Hector's elbows. "Go get 'em, Hector! Here's your chance to show those stupid sportswriters!" *We will fight them on the housetops.* Play ball! Win game! *And we will nevaah surrendah!*

Hector's reactions are never violent, and he finds himself increasingly detached from the "fight" for love and glory. The banality of the slogans attending these sports battles, intended to ready him for contact with the "Enemy," and the popular materialistic attitudes towards love and sex, made Hector feel as if he were a visitor from another planet. Again, the mannered grimness of competitive athletics turned the word "sport" into a travesty. Moving towards a championship and professional offers, Hector and his Negro friend Goose Jefferson are outsiders, so far as the "team" is concerned. The rest of the squad had long ago lost their love of the game. Joy in sports was denied them by what Lamer describes as playing "white-boss style":

There are only two styles of basketball in America, and of the two the white-boss grimly prevails over the Negro. The loose lost Negro style, with its reckless beauty, is the more joyful to watch or play, if you can, but it is the white-boss basketball that wins. Even Negroes must play white-boss basketball to win, though fortunately the best ones can't, and end up with both, the Negro coming out despite themselves right on top of the other style. And it is these boss Negro players who are the best in the world, the artists of basketball, the ones every pro

team needs two or three or six of if it is to stay beautiful and win.

The boys were *hustling* for all they were worth; that's the first essential of white-boss basketball. He who wants to relax and enjoy it is gonna be left behind, or knocked over and his ball ripped away from him. For white bosses play very rough. Unlike Negroes, they will not back off and let a man keep the rebound he has jumped for; they'll tackle him, lean on his back slap at his hands tie up his arms, hoping to wrestle away his prize. And even before the rebound, the grim jostling and bumping for position. A good white-boss basketball player is a good football player—deadly, brutal and never satisfied. What keeps him going is the thought that he and no one else must always win, every instant. Let him win twenty games and he will sulk and cry and kick down the referees' lockerroom door because he did not win the twenty-first. So by definition there can be no enjoyment. Can't you hear those bloodcurdling screams from the stands where thousands are tied in by their legs? They scream not for pleasure but revenge. Revenge for a crime that is committed fast as it can be wiped away. Because for every winner there is a loser, and then it is the winner who must pay, sooner or later, and on & on, right up to heaven vs hell.

In one short paragraph Lamer relates the predicament of Hector Bloom to the arena of our culture, where all the behavior patterns lead away from empathy and love:

The boys played twice as hard and twice as bad when Coach Bullion came on the scene. They would play on ferocious, all their lives hustling on & on, right up to heaven vs hell, because even as babies they had it printed in their little minds that someone is guilty, someone must pay, someone must lose, someone must take the blame, and Oh God, Oh God, each one prayed inside himself, if I can try just a little harder let it not be me!

How shall we speak of books of this sort? Are they examples of the new "muckraking"? If so, how does one get at such evils? Refuse to let your boys play basketball? Send them to schools which don't have an athletic program? These perversions are so much in the grain of our common life that to escape them seems almost impossible. Perhaps the slow development of an

inner, individual immunity is the only remedy that will work.

COMMENTARY

BRIDGING STRUCTURES

WE have been wondering how to offer criticism of utopian goals based on technical planning by experts, without being cavalier toward the implementing functions such planners are able to perform. The problem comes from the difficulty in distinguishing between the savored versus the structured goodness in human life. If the savor isn't there, the structure is only a source of confusion.

In our society, we know a great deal about the little infrastructures that contribute to the total vault of the technological installation. We are masters of this detail, experts in the analysis and integration of technical relationships.

But what about the infra-structures involved in the immediate savoring of the good? To describe these we usually fall back on slogans. Little by little, in the writings of men like A. H. Maslow and Carl Rogers, we are accumulating a body of research concerned with the fragile growing-tips of human wholeness, of being-enjoyment or being-savoring, but you have to become some kind of a poet to use this material effectively. You have to be willing to go out on a limb of faith in the trans-physical stuff of high human potentiality before you begin to savor what such men are trying to say. So what can you tell the planners?

Well, you can ask them, when they talk about automating the public schools, where would they be without Horace Mann? You can ask, who planned *him*?

And if they tell you that some day a computer to end all computers will make libraries with Great Books in them obsolete, you can ask where they would be without Plato . . . and Robert Hutchins.

It is just as Michael Polanyi says. The makers of maxims and the maximizers have no knowledge of, no command over, the essences of human life and human achievement, and, like other zealous

men, they ignore what they cannot command. They are only the Lenins—the improvisers—of the technological revolution, although by no means as bright as Lenin was; and they will eventually give way to their Stalinist successors, the hardeners and crystallizers of an inherited faith.

But it must be admitted that the expounders of essences are confined by difficult inhibitions. Who wants to sound like a moralist who speaks only of the importance of "character"? The vocabulary concerned with essences is alarmingly empty. The anatomy of "being human" is not yet a discipline, and trying to make-do with exhortation only turns people away. It *should* turn people away. What we need is bridges into the world of transcendent values, and bridges of any sort, whether across rivers or into the world of Being-Wholeness, involve structure. To build a bridge you have to do more than stand on the bridge-head and cheer.

The technical planners know how to build their kind of bridges, but these bridges don't go where we want to go, or they won't bear the kind of metaphysical burdens we carry. We need bridging structures into full humanity, and such structures are as private as the operations of a caterpillar turning itself into a free-flying moth. We may subsist on a common nourishment, but the metabolism of inner bridge-building, of growth into Beinghood, is strictly our own.

We have heard, lately, from revolutionary young theologians that God is dead. This, one may think, is their way of announcing the startling discovery that we are really on our own. That we always have been, but didn't realize it, is the insight which becomes the basis for criticism of historical religion.

One wonders when the priests of technology will catch up with these honestly abdicating priests of religion. When will they have the insight and the courage to declare that Technology is dead, too, in relation to the *secret* of salvation here on earth?

But does being "on our own" mean that there are no "techniques" of self-discovery, no valuable experience to be shared in a mutuality of growth?

Obviously, people are somehow able to help one another on this path. But we need to be very careful about letting "expertise" get us mixed up again. There is no phyness as bad as "spiritual" phyness, no pretense as misleading as religiosity.

Here, again, we must distinguish between the serviceability of maxims and the indescribable realities to which the maxims relate, but can never reveal. Probably, the word, "technique" should be entirely ruled out. Every step of human growth is an original act of being. Technique only gives skill in following models, and then, if the copies look pretty good, right away people go into business with them. We've had enough of that.

CHILDREN ... and Ourselves THE NEW PURITANISM

THE vulgarization of the idea of rational man into justification of endlessly rationalizing man has had many dehumanizing consequences, but nowhere are these effects more evident than in the emotional life of the present. The mechanization of love and sexual relations in the name of "freedom" and "fulfillment" have subjected romance to an acquisitive formula, made light of the spontaneous aspect of love, and replaced the idea of commitment in personal love with a kind of calibrated acquisitiveness. It seems unlikely that many people of today can have any feeling for the dramas lived out by Romeo and Juliet, Heloise and Abelard, or Tristan and Isolde.

Rollo May's article in the March 26 *Saturday Review*, "Antidotes for the New Puritanism," explores the modern alienation from "the dream of love" in terms of values which have been given little consideration in an age of popular psychoanalysis. Dr. May's chief contention is that the reversal of Victorian prudery often produces a state of mind which alienates in a different way, but with essentially similar distortions. He writes:

The new sophisticate is not castrated by society but, like Origen, is self-castrated. Sex and the body are for him not something to be and live out, but tools to be cultivated like a TV announcer's voice. And like all genuine Puritans (very passionate men underneath) the new sophisticate does it by devoting himself passionately to the moral principle of dispersing all passion, loving everybody until love has no power left to scare anyone. He is deathly afraid of his passions unless they are kept under leash, and the theory of total expression is precisely his leash. His dogma of liberty is his repression; and his principle of full libidinal health, full sexual satisfaction, are puritanism and amount to the same thing as his New England forefathers' denial of sex. The first Puritans repressed sex and were passionate, our new man represses passion and is sexual. Both have the purpose of holding back the body, both are ways of trying to make nature a slave. The modern man's rigid principle of full freedom is not freedom at all

but a new straitjacket, in some ways as compulsive as the old. He does all this because he is afraid of his body and his compassionate roots in nature, afraid of the soil and his procreative power. He is our latter-day Baconian devoted to gaining power *over* nature, gaining knowledge in order to get more power. And you gain power over sexuality (like working the slave until all zest for revolt is squeezed out of him) precisely by the role of full expression. Sex becomes our tool like the caveman's wheel, crowbar, or adz. Sex, the new machine, the *Machina Ultima*.

As a clinical psychologist, Dr. May has long been pondering the implications of encounters, during therapy, with patients who complain of a lack of feeling or passion in regard to their "sexual responses": "So much sex and so little meaning or even fun in it! Whereas the Victorian person didn't want anyone to know that he or she had sexual feelings, now we are ashamed if we do not." Dr. May writes of this banalization of sex:

Sexual knowledge can be bought in any bookstore, contraception is available almost everywhere outside Boston, and external societal anxiety has lessened. *But internalized anxiety and guilt have increased.* And in some ways these are more morbid, harder to handle, and impose a heavier burden upon the individual man and woman than external anxiety and guilt.

A second dilemma is that the new emphasis on technique in sex and love-making backfires. It often seems to me that there is an inverse relationship between the number of how-to-do-it-books perused by a person, or rolling off the presses in a society, and the amount of sexual passion or even pleasure experienced by the persons involved. . . . the emphasis beyond a certain point on technique in sex makes for a mechanistic attitude toward love-making, and goes along with alienation, feelings of loneliness, and depersonalization.

May proposes that what was thought to be the cure for Victorian repression may turn out to be as unsettling as the former disorder. He defines "puritanism" as a state of alienation from the body, a separation of emotion from reason. A moralistic society deplures ebullient sexual feeling, but an amoral society reproduces the same situation in a different form—alienation from

natural feeling and exploitation of the body as though it were a machine.

In an article reviewed last year in *MANAS* (June 30, 1965), Glenn Gray attempted to chart the complex route by which an increasing number of philosophically-minded students and young instructors are seeking affirmative values. Writing on "Why Existentialism Is Capturing the Students," Dr. Gray said:

On the campus Existentialism—which is both a mood and a metaphysics—is compounded of anxiety about being lost in the crowd and the lack of closeness or intimacy with fellow students. The underlying mood is quite different from the perennial depressions of late adolescence. These students are anxiously concerned with the problem of being themselves. Authenticity is the element of Existentialism that strikes the deepest note for them. The highest virtue is honesty with themselves and others while phoniness in whatever form is the greatest vice. "The thing that's wrong with this class," a senior burst out recently, "is that none of us is spontaneous."

Dr. May believes that the banalization of sex and love is at the root of the modern incapacity to be spontaneous—to express depth of feeling in interpersonal relationships:

Now the question rarely asked is, are not these young people—possibly wiser in their innocence than their culture in its sophistication—fleeing from some anxiety that is only too real? I propose that what scares them, like what scares our "new sophisticate," is an element in sex and love which is almost universally repressed in our culture, namely the *tragic, daimonic element*.

By "daimonic"—which I hasten to say does not refer to little "demons"—I mean the natural element within an individual, such as the erotic drive, which has the power to take over the whole person. . . . But the potentially destructive effects of the daimonic are only the reverse side of the person's constructive vitality, his passion and other potentially creative activities. The Greeks used the term "daimon" to describe the inspired urges of the poet. Socrates, indeed, speaks of his "daimon" as his conscience. When this power goes awry—when one element takes over the total personality and drives the person into disintegrative behavior—it becomes "demon possession," the historical term for psychosis. The

daimonic can be either creative or destructive, but either way it certainly is the opposite to banalization. The repression of the daimonic tragic aspects of sex and love is directly related to their banalization in our culture.

The daimonic is present in all nature as blind, ambitious power. But only in man does it become allied with the tragic. For tragedy is the self-conscious, personal realization of being in the power of one element; thus the Greeks defined tragedy as "inordinate desire," "pride," "reaching beyond just boundaries."

Whatever "love" may be, if it is to have human meaning its presence can best be recognized as authentic if it extends, rather than stultifies, the growth of selfhood. The word "sex" implies nothing of commitment: but love *means* commitment, however irrational, romantic or tragic. We come, then, to appreciate again the affirmative aspect of the new existentialist ethos. An affirmative existentialism is not amoral. As Prof. Frederick Mayer once said:

Existentialism in a sense is an extremely moral philosophy. It calls for commitment, for a way of life. Merely to theorize is inadequate. Merely to describe the universe is a superficial occupation. Just to use the method of analysis is to remain an outsider, alien to the realities of life. Existentialism calls for action through which we become pilgrims of inwardness and through which we realize a new significance.

FRONTIERS

The Choice

THERE is a man with one eye askew who lives in a small Vermont village. I don't know what caused his eye to be that way, but I have heard how he came to live and build a stone house in this out-of-the-way place. In the winter he reads, thinks, and eats too much of his wife's good cooking; in the summer he encourages his garden to do wonderful, growing acrobatics. He's the gentlest person I know. I'm sure he talks to his plants, because every living thing is special to him.

Of his family I know very little except that they were respected Jewish cloth merchants in Germany and could trace their lineage back into the twelfth century. As the oldest son in his honored family, this man was chosen to make the arrangements for getting Jewish children out of Nazi Germany and into Holland.

The Nazi personnel at the airport of exit got to know him and his job.

On a cold night in a hard winter late in the 1930's, he took a last group of children to their embarkation. As he waited to see the plane off, a loudspeaker announced that no more Jews would be allowed to leave Germany. He gazed into the sky at the disappearing plane. He reached into his pockets and felt the money he had. He walked over to the guard, whom he knew to be an honest man with a job. He emptied his pockets of cash into the hand of the guard, saying, "If there is a vacant seat on the next plane out, will you call me tonight at my home?" He turned and left the terminal.

His telephone rang in the early hours of the new day. There was a vacancy on the next plane.

He had gambled and won. While a law had been changed, the human response could not change so quickly. The guard risked much, perhaps everything, to give another man opportunity to live out his life.

On the outskirts of Frankfort is a women's prison. It stands at the corner of an intersection: On weekends inmates with children on the outside may have them as visitors for two days. In front of the prison a grassy green surrounds a modern stone-carving which to both the practiced or unpracticed art-lover resembles a woman's form. At the base of the sculpture lies a wreath of undying, blackish green leaves, beribboned. About thirty feet away is a long, cut-stone wall bearing carved inscriptions. A thousand women who had resisted the Nazis or helped the Jews were shot against that wall.

Down the street a few blocks, in peeling-paint ugliness, stood the building of the U.S.A. occupation forces command—barb wired into a great, flat, sprawled-out area separating it from the German headquarters.

Letter from Munich—Dec. 23, 1965

Our peace movements send money to Vietnam. I saw a film. . . . Men wept. We know what it means: WAR!

Two times we demonstrated against the Vietnam war. I am sure you were not instructed by your press! There were 500 to 600 people with torches; twenty-four hours before America House. The young students made a sitting strike. One (twenty years old) kicked a little when the police took him.

Then an American student here who tried to build a communication between the Eastern and Western zones was relegated from Munchner University and banished from Germany.

Now the best thing is: The Father of the school had brothers and sisters put to death by Hitler for their resistance. A wonderful old gentleman, does all he can for this young student from the U.S.A. His name means very much, and he is a lawyer and knows how to help. We cross our fingers.

Letter from America—Jan. 31, 1966

I still have doubts and questions about leaving this country—more than my husband has, I think. It isn't a question of loyalty to a government, because the only loyalty that makes sense to me is to people and to whatever principles seem most likely to lead toward a joyful life for all human beings. But I do love this country, with all its failings. . . .

The problem of what is becoming of the U.S.A. isn't just a problem of one isolated and perishing republic, because if this republic perishes much of the human race will undoubtedly perish with it, and certainly any chance of a joyful life will be lost. Something, then, has to be done to change the course this nation is following. If I thought I could do this outside the country, I would leave today. . . .

Another Letter from America—Jan. 29, 1966

. . . I wish we could move. I want David safe from the draft and I more and more hate the violence prevalent everywhere in the U.S.A.—our international policies, domestic policies, movies, TV, literature (witness the latest so-called "classic" by Capote), and daily life. I know that there is increased violence in other countries too, but it does not anywhere near approach what confronts us here on all fronts. I am no longer young and I realize now that aging isn't just white hair and wrinkles—one gets tired of fighting for fairness and decency and justice, yet cannot stop when it is so much a part of one's make-up. But now I would like to fight where the odds are not so much against me. . . .

Such letters—how can one answer them? You can only offer your hand to grasp. The grasping has to come from a life-giving impulse and the situation has to be right.

These days, questioning can know no limits or bounds. A few days ago a letter came from a

minister's wife who has been helping a Mississippi sharecropper's family. Until then our correspondence had been all on the subject of help to Mississippi.

Letter from Vermont—March 11, 1966

. . . You may think it queer for me to ask such a question, but I have been wondering if part of your reason for moving to Canada had anything to do with our involvement in Vietnam? The reason I wonder is that I often wish I could move to Canada so I wouldn't be guilty of supporting this war with my tax money. (Our income tax is only \$20, but still. . . .) I write my protest to the President and my Congressman, but that doesn't seem to make much difference. I feel it might be some kind of escapism—my thoughts of removing myself—but then couldn't one do as much or perhaps more to protest this war from Canada, and avoid at the same time supporting it with taxes? If you have time and are so disposed, I would appreciate your thoughts on this subject. . . .

VIRGINA NAEVE

Ayers' Cliff
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