VOLUME XXIII, NO. 4
JANUARY 28, 1970

THE AMERICAN DREAM

SOMETHING of a Socratic inquiry into what Americans mean when they talk about "Democracy" is launched by Irving Kristol in the Winter of 1969 *American Scholar*. Not much about what Democracy "is" appears in this discussion of "American Historians and the Democratic Idea," although it seems evident that Platonic definitions are responsible for some of the questions that are in the back of Mr. Kristol's head. In any event, he indicates that he thinks the Federalist papers are a source of hard-headed investigation of the question.

This leads directly to his main point: Most American historians, he says, have merely celebrated democracy while neglecting to identify the problems which may be intrinsic to a democratic society. There is much consideration of the problems which democracy must gird itself to overcome, but little wondering about the possibility of its having self-made ills. A large part of Mr. Kristol's article is devoted to assembling evidence of this neglect:

> It is really quite extraordinary how the majority of American historians have, until quite recently, determinedly refused to pay attention to any thinker, or any book, that treated democracy as problematic. Although our historians frequently quote from this source, and much effort has been made to determine who wrote which paper, it is a fact that no American historian has ever written a book on the Federalist papers. (As a further matter of fact, *no one* in America—historian, political scientist, purist, or whatever—ever published a book on *The Federalist* until a few years ago, when a Swiss immigrant scholar rather clumsily broke the ice.) Men like E. L. Godkin, Herbert Croly, Paul Elmer More, even Tocqueville have interested American historians mainly as "source material"—hardly anyone goes to them to *learn* anything about American democracy. And it is certainly no accident that our very greatest historian, Henry Adams, who did indeed understand the problematics of democracy, is a "loner," with no historical school or even a noteworthy disciple to carry on his tradition. As Richard Hofstadter recently pointed out, there are plenty of Turnerites, and Beardites, and, of course, Marxists among American historians, but there are no Adamsites or Tocquevillians.

People wonder, sometimes, whether the word "Establishment" really means anything, since it often sounds like a sneer at so many good people. In the foregoing paragraph Mr. Kristol isolates a chief characteristic of Establishment thinking—it rejects serious inquiry into the meaning and validity of its own first principles. An Establishment has other attributes, of course, one being active proprietorship of the current version of "traditional wisdom," and this is bound to have *some* self-justifying truth in it.

Mr. Kristol finds that, as a rule, American historians have treated Democracy as an article of the American faith, not as the name of a social order which needs continual examination, questioning, and improvement—improvement, that is, in what it *is*, not merely in what it *does*. He also finds that the Founding Fathers were more critically disposed; they regarded the government of the United States as a construction of political philosophy—they had themselves made that construction by combining a fundamental vision with a series of searchingly critical decisions. They were more devoted to its ideal intent than to its implementing forms, which they suspected might well be imperfect. Many of them knew quite well what Matthew Arnold was to put into summarizing words a century later:

> The difficulty for democracy is, how to find and keep high ideals. The individuals who compose it are, the bulk of them persons who need to follow an ideal, not to set one; and one ideal of goodness, high feeling, and fine culture, which an aristocracy once supplied to them, they lose by the very fact of ceasing to be a lower order and becoming a democracy. Nations are not truly great solely because the individuals composing them are numerous, free, and

> active; but they are great when these numbers, this freedom, and this activity are employed in the service of an ideal higher than that of an ordinary man, taken by himself.

Is Matthew Arnold here condemned out of his own mouth as some kind of "aristocrat," so that we don't have to listen to him? Mr. Kristol thinks that there is much intelligence and truth in Matthew Arnold's statement, whatever he is, and that we *do* have to listen to him. Arnold, in fact, creates the intellectual space for what Kristol has to say:

> These words doubtless sound anachronistic to the ears of those who have in their lifetime heard a President of the United States declare that he would disarm the ideological opponents of democracy by distributing the Sears, Roebuck catalogue among them. But such words [Arnold's] would not have sounded strange to the Founding Fathers, many of whom had occasion to say much the same thing. Between the political philosophy of the Founding Fathers and the ideology of the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, there stretches the fascinating—and still largely untold—story of what happened to the democratic idea in America.

Mr. Kristol proceeds to demonstrate with citations from various and sometimes major shapers of American historiography the gradual transformation of democratic political philosophy into "a religious *faith* in democracy." An early historian, Bancroft, for example, sounded the keynote by asserting that "the common judgment in taste, politics, and religion is the highest authority on earth, and the nearest possible approach to an infallible decision." Turner and Beard, both enormously influential, are more sophisticated in their declarations, but Mr. Kristol shows how they increased the strength of the Faith. Although Beard, as we know, changed his views at the end of his life, few were then paying attention to him. Even today, while there is some reaction among historians "against the notion that American history can be seen as one long conflict between those of true democratic faith and an ever-incipient 'aristocratic' reaction," the protest has few and lonely champions. And who is able—not to say who will dare—to distinguish between authentic general welfare services and merely political catering to the egotisms and appetites of those whose excellence lies merely in being numerous?

Toward the end of his paper, Mr. Kristol says musingly:

> I believe that all of us are well aware that the areas of American life that are becoming unstable and problematic are increasing in numbers and size every day. Yet our initial response—and it usually remains our final response—is to echo Al Smith: "All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy." But is this really true? Is it true of our mass media, of our political party system, of our foreign policy, of our crisis in race relations? Is it not possible that many of the ills of our democracy can be traced to this democracy itself—or, more exactly, to this democracy's conception of itself? And how are we even to contemplate this possibility if our historians seem so unaware of it?

No doubt Mr. Kristol will be somewhat suspect for writing this paper, and his natural defense—that he stands with the Founding Fathers—will not have much effect on people who prefer a Faith immune to doubts and questionings. Yet there is more to be said on this subject. Questioners like Mr. Kristol are both needed and necessary; they may even have some good effect on our historians, but even the best criticism tends to neglect a matter of the highest importance. It is this: that behind all faiths lie intuitively perceived truths that men cannot live without. When these truths are united with reason, all remains well, but when they are divorced from the best thinking of the best men—when they are taken out of the matrix of reason which gives them limit and fitness of application—they are invariably turned into bludgeons of orthodoxy. Then, instead of providing inspiration and guidance to daring, these truths are thrown out of scale—they are, as we say, "corrupted"; but they nonetheless *still exist.* They are still true. But since they are now the weapons of demagogues and the source of so much deception, the critics often decide that in effect these truths are a kind of nuisance. They don't quite *mean* to imply this, but the content of

their alarms and outcries suggests it. Let us then give some direct attention to the roots of the American Faith in Democracy—in what has been appropriately called the American Dream.

When, how, why, did the survival of that Dream begin to seem dependent upon jettisoning the critical spirit of the Founding Fathers?

First, what *was* the American Dream? We haven't the space—nor the learning—to trace it carefully to its ancient origins, but for those who are history-minded there is no better instruction in its more recent sources than Allen O. Hansen's *Liberalism and American Education in the Eighteenth Century* (Macmillan, 1926). Without elaborating, we can say that the primary and essential vision in the American Dream is the idea of the fundamental equality of all men. This was the mighty moral fulcrum of the eighteenth-century revolutions. It found articulation in the Declaration of Independence and provided the moving power of the announcement of the Rights of Man. A history of the United States which sees this country as an attempt to embody the eighteenth-century vision is James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (Blue Ribbon, 1931). In his closing chapter, Mr. Adams puts the substance of the Dream into words, adding that without it "America would have made no distinctive and unique gift to mankind." It was—

> that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. I once had an intelligent young Frenchman as guest in New York, and after a few days I asked him what struck him most among his new impressions. Without hesitation he replied, "The way everyone of every sort looks you right in the eye, without a thought of inequality." Some time ago a foreigner who used to do some work for me and who had picked up a very fair education, used occasionally to sit and chat with me in my study after he had finished his work. One day he said that such a relationship was the great difference between America and his homeland. There, he said, "I would do my work and might get a pleasant word, but I could never sit and talk like this. There is a difference there between social grades which cannot be got over. I would not talk to you there as man to man, but as my employer."

By pleasant coincidence the Winter *American Scholar* also has an article by a European physician and psychiatrist, Richard Huelsenbeck, who tells how he was treated when he first came here, thirty-four years ago, a fugitive from the Nazis. His testimony is incidental, but not less valuable for this reason:

> No other country, no other people have been so generous with me as the United States and the Americans. In 1938 when the Hitler refugees arrived in New York, there were always helpful people, who gave not only advice but also money. I experienced many sorts of good luck. I was introduced to Karen Horney, and eventually founded with her the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis . . . My success came through the spontaneity, the personal freedom, the generosity of Americans, who are the only people in the world able to treat foreigners like real people, similar to themselves. I unfortunately cannot say that about the Swiss among whom I now live. There is no xenophobia in America, and this is a great thing, a very great thing.

Not all newcomers to these shores can make such favorable report, but we can at least say that this observant man—who has now left us—felt something of the substance of the American Dream. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to keep him here, but he cannot be blamed for that.

We are not busy "blaming" ourselves or anybody else in this part of our discussion. Can we say anything more about what he felt? A quotation from Arthur M. Schlesinger's essay,- "What Then Is the American, This New Man?" (*American Historical Review,* January, 1943), will add a little. This passage expands on an observation by Harriet Martineau after a visit to America. "The eager pursuit of wealth," she

wrote, "does not necessarily indicate a love of wealth for its own sake." Schlesinger then gave this sense of the Dream:

> The fact is that, for a people who recalled how hungry and ill-clad their ancestors had been through the centuries in the Old World, the chance to make money was like the sunlight at the end of a tunnel. It was the means of living a life of human dignity. In other words, for the great majority of Americans it was a symbol of idealism rather than materialism. Hence this "new man" had an instinctive sympathy for the underdog, and even persons of moderate wealth gratefully shared it with the less fortunate, helping to endow charities, schools, hospitals and art galleries and providing the wherewithal to nourish movements for humanitarian reform which might otherwise die a-borning.

What we are after, here, is not some few comforting signs of remaining human decencies and generosities, as if to argue that America is, after all, a rather good place to be—or to be born—but to illustrate, if we can, the positive moral sources of the Faith which Mr. Kristol finds so uncritically "believed in" without being understood. Their roots run far deeper than ideology and politics. They tap certain fundamental goodnesses and longings which lie at the heart of being human. And if a reader should actually do as Mr. Kristol suggests or implies to be desirable—if he should *study* the writings and perhaps the lives of the Founding Fathers, in order to get at the prepolitical conceptions of these men—it might become evident that they regarded any and all political arrangements as but the *tools* of enlightened human beings, least of all were they confident that the system they had improvised was the sure-fire *producer* of the best and most deserving people on earth.

They were not in the least susceptible to delusions of this sort. It is quite evident that if you think that you have invented or inherited an infallible method for the production of good men, you have no need to inspect the quality of the product! It's *got* to be good. But the Founding Fathers couldn't think of themselves as creatures of an infallible system. As Mr. Kristol puts it:

> They were partisans of self-government—of government by the people—who deliberately and with a bold, creative genius "rigged" the machinery of the system so that this government would be one of which they, as thoughtful and civilized men, could be proud.
>
> In establishing such a popular government, the Founding Fathers were certainly under the impression that they were expressing a faith in the common man. But they were sober and worldly men, and they were not about to hand out blank checks to anyone, even if he was a common man. They thought that political institutions had something to do with the shaping of common men, and they took the question, *"What kind of common man does our popular government produce?"* to be as crucial a consideration as any other.

Mr. Kristol's point is that when people stop asking this question; when they take the answer for granted, instead of *looking to see*, they are getting their society ready for the button-maker's cauldron.

As early as 1808 John Adams had found a melancholy answer to the question. "We have," he wrote, "one material which actually constitutes an aristocracy that governs the nation. That material is wealth. Talents, birth, virtues, services, sacrifices, are of little consideration with us." He added that the object of both political parties was "chiefly wealth."

Were there, then, omissions or deceptive elements which weakened the original vision, and which in time perverted the Dream? There were, we can say, two causes of weakness. The structural support of the vision included the practical overcoming of want and poverty to make possible a basically decent life for all men. And it has been well argued that material things are *not* "materialism" until they exceed the upper limit of decency. But what is that limit? *Nobody said.* Nobody really cared. Anyhow, why shouldn't the requirements of "decency" escalate along with everything else? So Decency is now something which exists at a statistically measurable distance from Poverty, and poverty is a condition determined by factorial analysis of price structures and the GNP. America has the civilization of

toujours plus—"always more"—as a French critic has remarked.

The other weakening influence was, oddly enough, the incredible abundance of the New World—all that wealth there for the taking. So we took. The techniques of taking became elaborate after a while—a real *discipline,* you could say, with lots of tough courses offered by proud universities on how to practice it better than anybody else. There are a few rules you are supposed to know, so you touch the bases of traditional morality now and then, and this makes what you do good for everybody. And that, you tell your children—or used to tell them—is how America grew up to be a Beacon Light to all the world, just as George Washington predicted.

Well, as Mario Savio suggested a few years ago; neither Adam Smith nor Karl Marx has a solution for the sort of problems which develop from a vision which declares men equal and free, but then just blows the whistle to start a great, big, acquisitive free-for-all. This doesn't work, and thinking it will is really expecting too much of Natural Law. The improvisations of political hacks are hardly an adequate substitute for the humane intelligence which was behind the original Vision, so that in a very short time the vision began to mean no more than equal access to power and the freedom to use that power as you please (you can usually buy off the hacks).

So here we are—more than a century and a half after John Adams made his depressing estimate of what had happened to the Dream—trying as best we can to add up the costs of it all. We have developed some skill in cataloguing our troubles and our pains, but are still dodging the only really important question: *What kind of men does our system tend to produce?* In his closing words, Mr. Kristol says he thinks we are getting people who are uncomfortably like Ortega's mass man—getting a population which, in statistical profile, bears a frighteningly close resemblance to

> the individual who is not capable of assuming responsibility for self-limitation, for a kind of self-definition which is both generous and self-respecting. Interestingly enough, Ortega's definition of the "mass man" is identical with Plato's definition of the tyrant. Which in turn suggests that the idea of the tyranny of the majority—whether it be an essentially mindless, self-seeking majority or a simply rancorous one—is capable of more general application than has hitherto been thought to be the case. And this, in its turn, leads me to wonder whether American historians themselves have not too frequently, and all too willingly, fallen victim to what is ultimately a tyrannical vulgarization of the democratic idea.

Does Mr. Kristol perhaps have some "aristocratic" solution up his sleeve? We doubt it. He seems too good a student of Plato and of recent history to imagine that any merely political rearrangement of power could lead to the production of men who understand the moral necessity of self-limitation. Actually, so far as political systems are concerned, we've tried them all. It is evident from only the past fifty years that no effort to manufacture good men politically can be successful. The practice of self-limitation is not learned from "systems" whose authority rests on coercion. Self-limitation is a virtue, not a "conditioning." Without the presence of this and other virtues, every high vision will fail, and after that the laws, which demand far less of men than the virtues, begin to fail, too. It is then that the mere carpenters and handymen of politics, mechanics with no vision at all, make strenuous efforts to shore up the laws with enormities of propaganda and increasingly desperate forms of pretense.

REVIEW
OLYMPIAN OF THE WOODS

WHY should a man read Henry David Thoreau? This is not the same as asking why so many people *are* reading him. The reason for his present popularity is clear enough. He speaks in confirmation of submerged longings and brings a leavening dignity to the sometimes callow resistance movements of the time. He champions a cause obscurely felt but little understood. He is a poet who can be used to ennoble our disenchantments and he has manners that will never be learned at the angry conferences of righteous men.

Perchance Thoreau deserves something better of us; he is not, after all, a mere utility for armament against the shameless vulgarians and expert painmakers of the world. He did not write his books to be quivers of arrows for the debaters of a century after. One who borrows Thoreau's reasons ought to be sure that his arguments are Thoreau's as well. The man who would profit by Thoreau's means cannot maintain his credit without some honest devotion to Thoreau's ends, yet these are not matters of simple arithmetic.

We do not like what the men armed with cutting tools—and the complex evolutions of these instruments—have done to our mother earth. We do not like these people who make themselves known by the glint which comes into their eyes when they see something they can mine. Yet should we, for language to contest their claims, set out to mine Thoreau?

Thoreau was not a miner. He was a wonderer. He knew one great extraordinary secret—which was that he really knew nothing beyond that which gripped and utterly persuaded him—convinced Thoreau, personally—to his very depths. And then, when he said something about it, he would say it mainly to himself. His speech seems largely soliloquy. He batters at barriers now and then, but his opponents have always a certain generality. The roof of heaven must surely fall on such stupidities, he exclaims, and goes on to other things. Wide-eyed wonder rather than a suspicious skepticism shaped his approach to experience. He didn't go about with litmus papers and half-prepared exposés with blanks to fill in after he had found convicting proofs. It was just that the hearsay testimony which guides most of the world's works had no reality for him. It bore no enlarging meaning for his life. He had so strong a citizenship in his own being in the natural world that what reached him from the outside had to equal what he knew at first hand before he could take it into account. Like some wild creature of the forest, he might nibble at something new, but he would not *swallow* it without a full organic assent.

How else could this child of the Absolute, nurtured. on the undomesticated bosom of Eternity, behave? These may be large claims for Thoreau, but who more deserves them?

Granting our effort to understand him a poetic latitude, how else shall we make credible the strong, bridging structures this man supplies to our faint-hearted dreams? Let us say, then, that he speaks to our distant ears from the height of what authentically is—not all that is, but *something* that is—and that in a better age his language might have combined in a less prickly fashion with the opinions of men. This, at any rate, is one hypothesis for reading Thoreau. It seems at least a better one than to set out, pick in hand, to mine him for bits of rhetoric against the alienating structures we now find ranged against us.

Thoreau is first of all a man filled with wonder. He sustained his capacity for wonder by allowing no small egotisms to color his inspection of the spectacle of life. He did not seek to *get* anything from the world. He planned no conquests, found no adversaries. He fed and clothed his body in unostentatious ways and gave the rest of his time to *seeing*. This man was never in a hurry. He would not converse about the press of circumstance. How could he, having no ends affected by mere events or their timetables? He remained a witness, uninvolved, yet achieved a large instruction of himself. Except under intruding provocation, he did not disdain the practical counsels of the world. How can a man oppose what he has not heard, which does not exist for him? His work shows a curiously distant, an impassive, an unconsciously Olympian recognition that other men inhabited the earth and he

found some few kin among them. With these he shared something of his beinghood—his life of almost unbroken revery, which was all the life he had—by writing books. The books hardly sold. Thoreau barely existed for the men of his time, and Thoreau returned the compliment. Emerson, Alcott, and one or two others loved and savored him, but the rest knew of him no more than they knew of the world where he had his being. Thoreau was truly an invisible man.

These are thoughts which may come to the reader of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Crowell, 1961—a paper edition in pleasant dress), an account of a vast expedition accomplished by Thoreau in a row boat. Early in this volume, Thoreau draws his reader beneath the waters of the Concord River to intimate encounter with all the fish to be found there. He knows each species well, but not merely in Linnæan terms. He knows them as fellow inhabitants with whom he has had long and friendly social relations—almost convivial speech. Their circuits of activity, their necessities and pleasures are never less than nor subordinate to his. Why, he asks himself—as a most natural and ordinary question—is their world interfered with by men? What presumptuous bureau issued licenses for this invasion?

> Shad are still taken in the basin of Concord River at Lowell, where they are said to be a month earlier than the Merrimack shad, on account of the warmth of the water. Still patiently, almost pathetically, with instinct not to be discouraged, not to be *reasoned* with, revisiting their old haunts, as if their stern fates would relent, and still met by the Corporation with its dam. Poor shad! where is thy redress? When Nature gave thee instinct, gave she thee the heart to bear thy fate? Still wandering the sea in thy scaly armor to inquire humbly at the mouths of rivers if man has perchance left them free for thee to enter. By countless shoals loitering uncertain meanwhile, merely stemming the tide there, in danger from sea foes in spite of thy bright armor, awaiting new instructions, until the sands, until the water itself, tell thee if it be so or not. Thus by whole migrating nations, full of instinct, which is thy faith, in this backward spring, turned adrift, and perchance knowest not where men do *not* dwell, where there are not factories, in these days. Armed with no sword, no electric shock, but mere shad, armed only with innocence and a just cause, with tender dumb mouth only forward, and scales easy to be detached. I for one am with thee, and who knows what may avail a crowbar against that Billerica dam?—Not despairing when whole myriads have gone to feed those sea monsters during thy suspense, but still brave, indifferent, on easy fin there, like shad reserved for higher destinies. Willing to be decimated for man's behoof after the spawning season. Away with the superficial and selfish phil-*anthropy* of men,—who knows what admirable virtue of fishes may be below low-water mark, bearing up against a hard destiny, not admired by that fellow creature who alone can appreciate it! Who hears the fishes when they cry? It will not be forgotten by some memory that we were contemporaries. Thou shalt ere long have thy way up the rivers, up all the rivers of the globe, if I am not mistaken. Yea, even thy dull watery dream shall be more than realized. If it were not so, but thou wert to be overlooked at first and at last, then would I not take their heaven. Yes, I can say so, who think I know better than thou canst. Keep a stiff fin then, and stem all the tides thou mayest meet.

A playful ramble of the imagination? An indulgence of fancy? Not really, and far from entirely. The empire and universe of the shad is for Thoreau as unalienable in its rights and privileges as any of our sententious schemes of law. He is forever loosening man's imperial systems from their originating conceits and applying the familiar hegemonies for a very different effect. These high-sounding mandates and conveniently invented structures of obligation can be moved around, and Thoreau moves them to dramatize a less parochial morality. If the rights of man declare indifference to the rights of shad, something is amiss in human thinking, and Thoreau will have none of it. The burden of proof, he says, is on man, not upon the shad, and he has little respect for "thinkers" who suppose that there is here no matter worthy of their attention.

COMMENTARY
NEED OF A CLEAR SKY

THE editorial space for this week seems best devoted to enlarging the portrait of Thoreau, begun in Review. In another place in his book, he gives some idea of the authority on which he relies for determining what is right and true:

> Most people with whom I talk, men and women even of some originality and genius, have their scheme of the universe all cut and dried,—very *dry*, I assure you, to hear, dry enough to burn, dry-rotted and powder-post, methinks,—which they set up between you and them in the shortest intercourse; an ancient and tottering frame with all its boards blown off. They do not walk without their bed. Some to me seemingly very unimportant and unsubstantial things and relations, are for them everlastingly settled,—as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and the like. These are like the everlasting hills to them. But in all my wanderings, I never came across the least vestige of authority for these things. They have not left so distinct a trace as the delicate flower of a remote geological period on the coal in my grate. The wisest man preaches no doctrines; he has no scheme; he sees no rafter, not even a cobweb, against the heavens. It is clear sky. If I ever see more clearly at one time than at another, the medium through which I see is clearer. To see from earth to heaven, and see there standing, still a fixture, that old Jewish scheme! What right have you to hold up this obstacle to my understanding you, to your understanding me! You did not invent it; it was imposed on you. Examine your authority. Even Christ, we fear, had his scheme, his conformity to tradition, which slightly vitiates his teaching. He had not swallowed all formulas. He preached some more doctrines. As for me, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are now only the subtilest imaginable essences, which would not stain the morning sky. Your scheme must be the framework of the universe; all other schemes will soon be ruins. The perfect God in his revelations of himself has never got to the length of one such proposition as you, his prophets, state. Have you learned the alphabet of heaven, and can you count three? Do you know the number of God's family? Can you put mysteries into words? Do you presume to fable the ineffable? Pray, what geographer are you, that speak of heaven's topography? Whose friend are you that speak of God's personality? Do you, Miles Howard, think he has made you his confidant? Tell me the height of the mountains of the moon, or of the diameter of space, and I may believe you, but of the secret history of the Almighty, and I shall pronounce you mad. Yet we have a sort of family history of our God,—so have the Tahitians of theirs,—and some old poet's grand imagination is imposed on us as adamantine everlasting truth, and God's own word!

Taking Thoreau for champion could be a risky business. What if one contracts to live up to him in all respects, when seeking to enjoy the benefits of one of his powerful asides? Thoreau's "social philosophy" is hardly more than fallout from what were for him far deeper concerns.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THE QUICK AND THE DEAD IDEAS

A BOOK by Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics,* written years ago but published in English this month by W. W. Norton ($5.00), is noticed here instead of under Review for the reason that the first chapter, which seems the most valuable, is addressed to teachers. Ortega's intent is to stimulate reform in education. This introductory chapter deals with certain embarrassments and frustrations known to all who teach, yet are difficult to understand. Ortega illuminates the cause of these feelings. And here, as elsewhere, his writing embodies the unblinking honesty that seems present only when a man of undoubted intelligence and wide learning pursues philosophic inquiry as a matter of life or death.

Ortega begins by contending that the typical student in the typical school undertakes his studies in a frame of mind which is practically the opposite of that through which *actual knowledge* is acquired. He argues this at some length, to the conclusion that all teaching, so long as it is conceived as the "transmission of knowledge," is attended by inevitable falsity or pretense. There are exceptions, of course, but the exceptions are made possible by those few who are not typical students at all, but are, instead, the sort of persons who create knowledge.

What does he mean by this?

He means that actual knowledge grows only out of human effort in response to unavoidable inner necessity. The men who discover truth do so because they *must*. What such men find out is then organized into what we call a "discipline"—something taught in the schools. The typical student is not a pursuer of truth, but a responder to external academic and social obligation. He is *supposed* to go to school. His parents want him to have an *education.* He won't, he is told, get a *job* unless he is equipped with certain scholarly attainments or the certified symbols thereof. All this is impressed upon the young by a variety of means, and they naturally feel some inclination to comply, so they become "students." Such a student may live out his entire life without discovering that it has been made up of sequences of reactions to externally imposed obligations, with little or nothing added in response to his own human needs.

What can be done about this terrible situation, so often not even known to exist? Ortega makes this comment:

> You will understand that the problem is not solved by saying, "All right, but if studying is a falsifying of man, and if, in addition, it leads, or can lead, to such consequences, let us not study." To say this would not be to solve the problem, but simply to ignore it. To study and to be a student was always, and is now above all, one of man's inexorable needs. Whether he wants to or not, he has to assimilate the accumulation of knowledge under pain of succumbing, either as an individual or a group. . . . The solution . . . does not consist of decreeing that one not study, but in a deep reform of that human activity called studying and, hence, of the student's being. In order to achieve this, one must turn teaching completely around and say that primarily and fundamentally teaching is only the teaching of a need for science and *not* the teaching of the science itself whose need the student does not feel.

Ortega is himself a practiced and knowledgeable teacher, and when he has a difficult as well as radical point to make, he goes over it again and again. He is determined to be understood. So our summary of this chapter can be at best a very inadequate reflection of his teaching. Even so, some of our readers will already have realized what direct correlations there are between this "lesson" for teachers, set down by Ortega in the early 1930's, and observations by Carl Rogers back in 1952 on the actual harmfulness of "teaching." Ortega also shows awareness of what we know mainly from A. H. Maslow's enormously clarifying distinction between deficiency-needs and being-needs. Then, of course, the universal complaint of today's students that the education offered them in the universities is "irrelevant" is anticipated by Ortega when he applies the touchstone of his analysis to the vast stores of information which the schools now attempt to "transmit" to the young.

But Ortega's point may soon be lost or forgotten unless his idea of truth or knowledge is clearly understood. His categorical claim is that knowledge

either grows in a man in response to urgently felt personal need, or what accumulates is *not knowledge at all.* He says in support of this view:

> It is enough to compare the approach of a man who is going to study an already existing science with the approach of a man who feels a real, sincere, and genuine need for it. The former will tend not to question the content of the science, not to criticize it; on the contrary, he will tend to comfort himself by thinking the content of the science which already exists has a defined value, is pure truth. What he seeks is simply to assimilate it as it already is. On the other hand, the man who is needful of a science, he who feels the profound necessity of truth, will approach this bit of ready-made knowledge with caution, full of suspicion and prejudice, submitting it to criticism, even assuming in advance that what the book says is not true. In short, for the very reason that he needs, with such deep anguish, to know, he will think that this knowledge does not exist, and he will manage to unmake what is presented as already made. It is men like this who are constantly correcting, renewing, recreating science.

Now, clearly enough, comes Ortega's way of distinguishing between deficiency-needs and being-needs. The falsity in teaching arises out of its comprehensive if often only tacit implication that what is being taught to the student will satisfy his being-needs. This, Ortega shows, is monumental deception. It is simply impossible for being-needs to be met this way. Continuing, he points to the fact that the vital activity of the really *questioning* student in no way illustrates the "normal" learning process:

> . . . that is not, in the normal sense of the term, what the student's studying means. If the science were not already there, the good student would not feel the need of it, which means that he would not be a student. Therefore, the matter is an external need which is imposed upon him. To put a man in the position of a student is to oblige him to undertake something false, to pretend that he feels a need which he does not feel.
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> But there are objections that will be made to this. It will, for example, be said that there are students who deeply feel the need to solve certain problems that are involved in this science or that, but it is hardly sound to call them students. It is not only unsound, it is unjust. Because these are the exceptional cases of creatures who, even if there were neither studies nor science, would, by themselves, invent them for better or for worse, and would by the force of an inexorable vocation, dedicate their strength to investigating them. But . . . the others? The immense and normal majority? It is they, and not those more venturesome ones, who bring into being the true meaning—not the utopian meaning—of the words "student" and "to study." It is unjust not to recognize them as the real students, and unjust not to question with respect to them the problem of what studying as a form and type of human occupation, is . . .
>
> It would be delightful if being a student were to mean feeling a most lively desire for this, that, or the other kind of knowledge. But the truth is exactly the opposite; to be a student is to see oneself as the person obliged to interest himself in the very thing that does not interest him or, at best interests him only vaguely, indirectly, or in general terms.

Explaining all this to students, at appropriate times and occasions, and with the right words, might be the means of relieving them of a great deal of unnecessary despair, and of the need for painfully conscientious role-playing. It could also introduce much spontaneous honesty to education. It could put an end, not to teaching, but to the false position which teachers feel themselves obliged to assume, through a misconceived sense of moral obligation. That obligation is properly fulfilled, as Ortega says, only by teaching about the *needs* that have been felt by the creators of science and other forms of human knowledge. And doing this is not the same as claiming to "transmit" the knowledge so created. There should be a conscientious abolition of this ancient fraud. Real teaching is invitation to genuine hungers, not stuffing the young with secondhand satisfactions, descriptions of authenticities felt by and overheard from other men Ortega's diagnosis of the present ills of education is precise:

> Since culture or knowledge has no other reality than to respond to needs that are truly felt and to satisfy them in one way or another, while the way of transmitting knowledge is to study, which is not to feel those needs, what we have is that culture or knowledge hangs in midair and has no roots of sincerity in the average man who finds himself forced to swallow it whole. That is to say, there is introduced into the human mind a foreign body, a set of dead ideas that could not be assimilated.

FRONTIERS

Where is the Treasure?

THE latest publication of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, *To End War* (FOR, Box 271, Nyack, New York 10960), by Frederick J. Libby, reports the career of a man of immeasurable good will and inexhaustible determination. It is the story of the founding and subsequent activity of the National Council for the Prevention of War. The idea of this organization, which held its first meeting in Washington, D.C. in January, 1922, was to give voice to a number of member organizations whose principles, interests, or sympathies were on the side of peace. The NCPW started out with three basic planks:

1. Progressive world organization.

2. Worldwide reduction of armaments by international agreement to police status.

3. Worldwide education for peace.

Early in its history there were some twenty-six participating organizations constituting the Council, including groups like the American Association of University Women, the National Education Association, the Foreign Policy Association, the National League of Women Voters, and others of similar character. There were also cooperating organizations which contributed viewpoints but did not vote.

As Executive Secretary of the organization Mr. Libby became an engaging, persuasive, and tireless lobbyist for peace. No one who knew him could fail to respect him. He was an ordained minister of the Congregational Church but as he gravitated more and more to work for peace he came under Quaker influence, and it would be difficult to find a better illustration of the Quaker spirit in action, at least in the area in which he chose to work. That area was the nation's capital, where the decision-makers of the country met and shaped the policies which brought peace or war. For his tiny staff Libby found people as devoted to peace as he was and the record of what they accomplished together over the years makes the reader feel that they did everything they could.

The only question about this record that seems important enough to ask concerns the broad validity of the assumption that the best way to work for peace is to try to influence political decision-makers. A book that would be good to read along with *To End War* is Sondra R. Herman's *Eleven Against War* (Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University), which deals exhaustively with the roots of the mentality and attitudes of the men Fred Libby found himself coping with—attitudes which, in the end, brought us to where we are today. Mrs. Herman writes at length about the thinking of the "men of the polity," the men who, in the second decade of this century and in the 1920's, were regarded by practically everybody in America as sagacious and honest leaders. They were men who believed confidently and completely in "an international polity united by formal contracts and by allegiance to the rule of law." After all, what else was there for practical men—Americans and real *doers*—to believe in?

In the pages of *To End War* the reader finds many firsthand accounts of the decencies of the men of the polity, and learns of their regret in doing what, finally, they felt they were forced to do, because they could see no workable alternative and because of the trust reposed in them by many millions who held the same basic opinions. Meanwhile, the sort of thing that happened after President Roosevelt's "Quarantine" speech on Oct. 5, 1937—recognized as a repudiation of America's "neutrality" policy—leaves no doubt that the Secretary and staff of the National Council for the Prevention of War were often given reason to believe in the "effectiveness" of their attempts to improve decision. As Mr. Libby tells it:

> A day or two later a card was brought to me in my office with a ceremony to which we were unaccustomed. It bore the name "Gen. S. D. Embick." General Samuel D. Embick was Deputy Chief of Staff. In World War I he had been

> America's chief strategist. He shook hands with me quietly and sat down on my sofa without asking that the door to my reception room might be closed. He was in civilian clothes and on the street would not have been distinguishable from any civilian. No one could have been less pretentious. He had three points to make: (1) that the President's speech meant war with Japan; (2) that we were in no position to win a war with Japan; (3) that we should be in for humiliation and defeat if we went to war. Being in the army, General Embick could do nothing about it, but we could, and he wanted us to let him know if he could help us in any way.
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> I must confess that I was taken aback by this frank little speech. My first thought was, "This must be the bravest general in the army." I didn't know at the time that the army's pledge of loyalty is to the Constitution of the United States and not to the President. General Embick believed that the President was endangering the country.

After Pearl Harbor, Fred Libby went right on working for peace. In 1942 he gave forty-seven talks on a Pacific Coast speaking tour, billed as "a pacifist who does not believe that we should have any army, but should rely on good-will alone." During the war the Council worked to curb the growth of hate and intolerance and for a negotiated peace as early as possible.

At last report, Fred Libby, who retired in 1954, was very much alive at ninety-four. Probably no one can look back on a lifetime spent in Washington, D.C., with fewer regrets. But when you try to add up the "results" of all this effort you don't really know what to say. The "measurable" achievements are problematic. What is not problematic at all is the quality of the man's life and the extraordinary drive behind it, and Libby's true success doubtless lies here. A story repeated at the end of Robert Michel's essay, "The Iron Law of Oligarchy," seems appropriate to illustrate this point:

> The peasant in the fable, when on his deathbed, tells his sons that a treasure is buried in the field. After the old man's death the sons dig everywhere in order to discover the treasure. They do not find it. But their indefatigable labor improves the soil and secures for them a comparative well-being.

Peace, like the treasure, simply wasn't in the soil tilled by Mr. Libby with such incredible persistence and devotion, yet his efforts cannot be called wasted. They had their influence on the human community. But where is the treasure, then? If there is any answer at all to this question, it lies, we think, in the Gandhian idea of a Constructive Program—a broader, more diffused effort to bring about basic change at the roots of the common life. It is when both people and rulers imagine that the issues of war and power can be settled by a few decision-makers that really impossible dilemmas arise, and government is pursued according to the unsavory choices of lesser-of-two evils philosophy. The power of leaders to choose wisely and well is wholly unreal unless it is armed by moral substance in the people. It was hardly possible for this to be recognized in the early 1920's, when Fred Libby began working for peace. Today, however, it should be hardly possible to make sense out of anything else. Peace must be built from the ground up.