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NECESSITY

[This article is a condensed version of a talk given by Arthur E. Morgan, in Yellow Springs, Ohio, on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday—June 20, 1968.]

RECENTLY I came across some loose sheets in an old notebook. This bit is dated January 13, 1902. It was written on one of my early surveying trips, in the yet virgin woods of Minnesota. I was spending the night at the home of a German immigrant farmer. I put on my coat and cap and my foot-rigging and went for a night-time walk along a primitive woods road. I wanted time to think.

My mostly unschooled, naïve mind was running on old, time-worn questions of fate and necessity. Can human purpose have any significance? Does not necessity rule the world, with every instant being the working of immutable natural law? Is not any other conclusion only wishful thinking?

My state of mind was not the result of indifference. Growing up in a very orthodox fellowship, I had been intensively concerned to find a right course. Yet I thought I saw great incongruities in the patterns of belief I had inherited and acquired. Gradually, and with the most intensive searching of my life, I had arrived at the conclusion that the first requirement was that I be honest with myself. I must try to see things as they are, not as it is safe or comfortable to believe, or because I have been so conditioned.

After a time, sitting on that log in the winter night, I began to be cold. I walked back to the farm house, where I wrote down what I had been thinking. I shall quote a few sentences as I wrote them down on that winter night in Minnesota:

> Why is right conduct the main issue of life? What do I mean by right conduct? It is conduct which makes me approach the truth. What is truth? Truth is the expression of necessity. Necessity says, "One and one make two." Truth obediently reports, "One and one make two."
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> How shall I free myself from necessity? If I rebel, and become immoral, she masters me by force. If I am obedient, and moral, I am her slave. If I am her enthusiastic lover, her kind embrace but disguises the immutable grasp she has upon me. The more I love her, the softer and kinder is her embrace. But it is just as immutable as ever. She treats me just as convicts are treated in our reformatory. When they try to escape, they are shut up close. When they show no desire to escape, they are given more liberty. So, the only way I see for being free from necessity is to follow her eagerly and to hunt out her desires before she enforces them upon me. In that way she gives continually larger range to move about in.
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> The chances are perhaps one to one that there is no virtue in being free from necessity. The chances seem nothing to one that we can be free from her.

So I turned the old threadbare question over in my mind that winter night. The idea grew with me that, insofar as I learn the nature and the pattern of necessity, I have greater freedom. Necessity, I came to conclude, is the innate structure of the universe. Without it there would be no universal natural law, but only universal chaos. We live in a world where we can be sure that two and two make four. We can learn what to count on. The person of caprice or of traditional conformity would like the universe in general to be run by necessity, but with special exceptions in his case. He prays for rain when his crops need it, and for clear weather at harvest time.

Necessity is the texture man should use to build his world. From its patterns he creates his designs. As he learns the ways of necessity he discovers what necessity does allow.

So far as the ways of the physical world are concerned, during the past few centuries scientific man increasingly has come to recognize and to

welcome necessity, not as a universal tyrant, negating all prospect of human freedom, but as the pattern of the cosmos. He has discovered that his freedom and fulfillment come by relating himself to necessity, not as the ultimate enemy, but as impartial guide to show the possible ways of fulfillment.

The research scientist does not resent necessity. He studies it, relies on it and builds on it. And what a wonderful world he is building in his field. He is removing ancient barriers and is enlarging the life of man. It is from the very patterns of necessity that he creates his designs. As he learns the ways of necessity he discovers what necessity does allow. Out of those allowables he creates his cultures, his technologies and his human world. The very basis of his achievement is his learning the dictates of necessity. It is the same with the engineer, the surgeon, the biologist, the agriculturalist. The modern world is being built on the recognition of necessity. Fabulous results have been achieved through the clear, fully recognized acceptance of necessity.

Yet we continue to fail to think of the ways of necessity as having similar relations to the overall lives of men. We do not clearly recognize and undertake to profit by the ways of necessity as they bear upon the major trends of our lives. I am going to try to illustrate possible relations of necessity as they concern our major problems, and also our ends and aims.

First of all I shall use a simple, practical instance, which does not involve abstruse thinking. As we go through our lives, the most obvious instrument each of us has for that purpose is the body-mind complex which one calls himself or herself. Each of us has a general feeling that here is some relation to necessity. Yet often we stop with that general consciousness, and do not make a major issue of asking ourselves specific questions of necessity. The research chemist does not achieve significant results by having general impressions about necessity. He asks very specific questions.

In my own case, asking specific questions was not a wholly voluntary occurrence. It was forced upon me by circumstance. When very young I had an attack of cerebral meningitis which was protracted and very nearly fatal. My mother has told me that, when I seemed certainly to be dying, she hoped it would come quickly and be over with. As a result of that illness my bodily conditions seemed disturbed, and recovery did not come quickly. Often I asked myself, under these circumstances, what is the use of trying.

In various ways I sought for encouragement. I mutilated plants in our garden, and watched to see what capacity for recovery they might have.

One incident was of considerable interest. The "Sermon on the Mount" caught my attention. There seemed to be a suggestion of great possibility that a man might have some part in his own destiny. I read that many, many times. I could at least try, and the results could speak for themselves.

As I went about town I watched men and women to observe how fully they were realizing the potentialities of physical and mental well being. In most cases, it seemed to me, they were far from meeting the full possibilities. If they should undertake to meet all of them, what wonderful men and women they would be. Was it possible that if I should make the most of possibilities, I might rise to the average actual condition of other men? I would do what I could, and find out.

I came to a fairly clear conclusion that a man's body, including his mental equipment, is the major instrument he has for living his life, and that to do less than he could with his body is to limit the total of his life. I tried to appraise the possible ways of using and dealing with my body and mind, and to select those ways which seemed most promising. For instance, without the specific research data which I would have welcomed, I

omitted the use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee and tea, though I did not know anyone else who went so far in that direction. In various ways I tried to discover the dictates of necessity. Bodily recovery came slowly in some respects. Even after I was twenty, there were times at night when, from long standing shortcomings, it would seem to me quite improbable that I should be alive in the morning. If the administration of the body-mind complex seeks to find and to follow the ways of necessity, that course may have something to do with the outcome of life.

Another area where I decided that it is useful to learn the ways of necessity is in the uses of time. There again I found it necessary to bargain with necessity. Lacking training of the schools in my field, I was trying at odd times to dig out the fundamentals of engineering.

Working as a land surveyor, it was the almost universal practice for the gang to spend the evenings while on the job at playing cards. There were almost no exceptions to that habit. I would make it a practice to try to have human fellowship with the crew during the day. Then at night, off in a corner with a kerosene lamp, I would be an isolate, trying to close my ears from the table-poundings and the shouting. I decided that necessity called for me to deliberately break with prevailing custom in the use of time. To protect myself I did not learn the cards. Even today I never have learned to name them.

In the earlier years, one question constantly occurred. It was, "What's the use?" What is the value of life, to justify sustained great effort? In my determination to be honest with myself, and to try to see things as they are, the incentives of theology faded, and they never have returned. If there should be great values worth giving the total resources of one's life, then to me they must be in the very nature of things. They must be as natural and as potentially inherent as is necessity. Little by little the vast probabilities of value and significance inherent in the nature of things have grown upon me.

I feel no supernatural certainty, but great hope. Were it given to me to choose either an unending felicity, provided by providence and handed to me, or a chance to work out my own destiny, with great effort and real risk, I surely would choose the latter.

I dislike the designation of "materialist" because so frequently it has been used by men without imagination. It may be that subatomic physics may be pushed back to where the term matter-energy seems not to apply, though the sequence of natural cause and effect still appears to control. It may be that, as in the human brain, the sequence of cause and effect may have such complexity as to go beyond existing categories, and yet be in one sequence or order of natural cause and effect.

I do not crave any label. However, if I should feel compelled to give a label to my pattern of thought I might call myself a necessitarian, though I am largely ignorant of the customary implications of that term. That word has been so little used as perhaps not to carry a great burden of varied implications.

I shall give you a more general illustration of the value of knowing ways of necessity. When we come to consider ways in which we commonly fail to objectively explore necessity, we find that one of the most serious blind spots of the human race results from man's very general failure to understand the significance of biological pleasure and pain. An effective, critical study of that subject might result in a profound change in human affairs. We marvel at living nature's vast achievements, yet, when we observe the mistakes she has made, it looks like a very imperfect job. Nature's signals get very badly mixed. For instance, on the slopes of our western mountains, when cattle eat "loco weed" they are affected very much as men are in taking opium. They give evidence of ecstacy, develop an uncontrollable habit of eating loco weed, and then lose their health and die. Man's weaknesses in such respects are not peculiar to his species, but are a part of the

world of life. In this, men have the advantage of reflective intelligence.

As to biological pleasure and pain in human affairs, while the emergence of ethics, law and custom have been efforts to deal with the issue, and to lead men to control and to discipline their inborn influence, men have largely failed to make the critical, objective inquiry necessary for appraising the significance of pleasure and pain. Biological pleasure and pain are not ends in themselves, but only aids to survival. (When I refer to the drives of pleasure and pain I have not in mind a general sense of well-being, but only refer to calls to specific pleasurable actions, which have their origins in biological drives.)

Take an anthology of world poetry. Count the passages which extol pleasure or joy as the dominant temper of life. Count also the passages which refer to pain or other undesirable experience as giving life its dominant quality. They will be found to appear about equally, reflecting the general ambivalence of human opinion as to the relative dominance of pleasure and pain.

We read in Ecclesiastes:

> For what hath man for all his labor, and the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath labored under the sun? For all his days are sorrow, and his travail grief.

No less explicit is the opposite emphasis, as in the Psalm:

> In Thy presence is the fullness of joy;
> in Thy right hand pleasures forevermore.

That ambivalence of human appraisal has not changed for two millennia. Rousseau wrote in *Emile:*

> Ever more sorrow than joy.
> This is the lot of all of us.

Robert Bridges, in his *Testament of Beauty* expressed himself:

> Our hope is ever livelier than despair,
> our joy livelier and more abiding than
> our sorrows are.

There is another respect in which human judgment commonly is not well-informed. It is important to the course of life to recognize the deeply rooted biological fact that biological pain or pleasure generally is not long standing.

The fact is not accidental. It is firmly built into the biological nature of pleasure and pain. As a guide toward survival, attention generally should be unoccupied and free to receive other signals. If either pleasure or pain occupies the attention, that makes attention less available to receive new signals which may be important to survival. So it is biologically important that when pleasure or pain have done their work with reference to any particular situation, they disappear and leave the attention free to receive new warnings of danger or new invitations to favorable action. How much of men's lives are spent in searching for unfading biological pleasures, and in condemning circumstances for not maintaining them? This tendency is a source of vast disillusionment, resentment, and frustration.

We do not face a simple alternative of accepting or rejecting our biological compulsions and leadings. A large part of them are valid and essential. If I have unintentionally put my hand in the fire I do well to obey the biological impulse to remove it. If I am hungry I do well to eat. Yet it is essential to humanity that we critically and objectively appraise the maze of our biological conditioning, and that we accept or reject elements of our biological inheritance on the basis of the evidence. We will not ignore the judgments and conclusions of the many thoughtful and sincere men who have sought to point the way, in appraising our inborn impulses and biological desires, but we will not refrain from full questioning.

Today, in an effort to be free from accumulation of obsolete dogmas there is a common feeling among young people that the rejection of the traditional is equivalent to freedom. There may be a simple, undiscriminating conclusion that what is "natural" is good. This

course throws us back to the oldest servitude, that of the biological drives. Much of the productive effort of civilized man has been that of gradually achieving understanding and mastery of the maze of biological drives. If that understanding is lost in "the new freedom," it may be a long, hard climb to free us again from that biological servitude. Neither wholesale acceptance nor wholesale rejection of the mass of biological drives is good.

The early centuries of Christianity were passed mostly in the Roman world, at a time when the abuse of the sex drive was extreme. An uncritical reaction of major Christian groups was that sex is inherently evil. A common expression was "The world, the flesh and the Devil." Charles Kingsley is my authority for the statement that when Egypt was solidly Christian this feeling of the inherent evil of sex was so strong that half of the population of Egypt was living in monasteries and nunneries. Apparently it did not occur to them that this course would be most effective in eliminating that element of the population which had strong ethical commitment.

There is no easy way to an optimum course of living. A major requirement is that we care enough about life to make sustained effort to find our way, both in thought and in action. Dogmas of acceptance and dogmas of rejection are alike inadequate. Objective critical study of necessity, motivated by caring much about life, and sustained by aspiration and critical imagination, gives hope of being productive. I believe that a major and perhaps revolutionary gain may be made by persistent, critical inquiry of the biological nature of pleasure and pain. I believe that a desirable result may be far lesser reliance on biological pleasures and satisfactions, and far greater on finding of enduring joy and of sense of value in active and eager participation in effort to realize and to enlarge the significance of living, not chiefly for ourselves individually, but for the whole of life.

If for the past few centuries men over the world had been mastering themselves, learning honesty and brotherhood and the ways of the open mind, we would be in no danger today of atomic war. If a person, allowing his imagination to play, looks to the future, he may see crises looming which may make most crises of today seem small and simple. To those who look back from that future, the simple, relatively primitive life of today may seem like the golden age. These possible crises may be real possibilities, not idle dreams. The world of today and tomorrow is creating risks which man never knew, with new hopes and new dangers.

Today the time is in our hands in which we can be working with human motives and actions which might remove possibility of great crises before they arrive. What course shall we take? That will depend on how much we care about life. Do we feel ourselves to be a part of the great adventure of humanity, with values developing to outrun our imagination? Does this prospect win our sustained self-mastery and our full resources, economizing them and making them count to the full?

Necessity has in her warehouse a vast inventory of plans, and of the materials out of which these plans can be built. Commonly these have to be paid for in advance. The towering cathedrals of Europe lived first in the imaginations of men before they took shape in stone and mortar. Yet those who planned and built them were only in the early spring of human mastery, imagination and aspiration.

When we speak of great fulfillments we need not be thinking of stone and mortar, or of towering activities. I think it is highly probable that the greatest of human achievements have been by men and women whose names never were known beyond a narrow neighborhood. Quite probably in the future as in the past the winning of beauty, truth and excellence may be by persons who were long unknown who left behind living seed of new insight and quality.

I have nearly run my course. I live in the future—the future of mankind, and of all of life. I

do not look forward to personal immortality. I see the person I call me as not a separate unit of life. To me it is a thread in the fabric of life, a moment in the course of being. I have had a chance to participate as a moment in that course of being. My immortality is in the continuity and the quality of that being. Day by day I live and have my joy, as part of mankind.

With the theist, searching for the cause behind the cause, I do not wish to dispute. I only confess that the idea he holds has not been revealed to me, though I have endeavored to search honestly. So far as I know, terrestrial life, and the life of man, are chance events in the course of circumstance. But here we are, we are here! Day by day I live and find my joy in the future. I feel great hope, but not certainty, for human life. The issue I would live by is this: Will the continuity of life have more value because I have lived? Bodily pleasures and personal ambitions are but incidental in comparison.

Always I have hoped not to mislead myself or others. The hope I have seems to me to be legitimate. The dangers I feel seem to me to be real. To me, this is life as it is.

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REVIEW
ANATOMY OF CONTEMPT

WHEN education and the forms of culture are converted into instruments for maintaining power, the general effect on people is to unfit them for thinking, to turn them into imitators of one another, and, in time, to generate broadly discernible psychological attributes which then are identified as "mass culture" and subjected to minute analysis by sophisticated intellectuals. Bernard Rosenberg has some comment on these activities in the July-August *Dissent:*

> To reject "mass-cult" and "mid-cult" is to espouse high culture—and to do that is to be put down in certain circles as a snob. Very well; there are worse epithets. Shakespeare really does seem to me a better playwright than Arthur Miller and a better writer than Mickey Spillane. . . .
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> But there is a more vicious snobbery which converts "masses" into "slobs" feeding on cultural garbage prepared for them by their betters. Mad Avenue chefs "know" that finer fare should not be wasted on ordinary men and women. The communications industry drips with this contempt. Tough executives brutally assert the complete disdain they feel for their audiences. . . . It is really distressing, however, that so many philosophers, historians, psychologists, and other academics should also be irremediably contemptuous of the people at large.

The difficulty of even discussing this problem without speaking of the "masses" as "they" is an embarrassment for men of intelligence who would like to change this situation. Lethargic, unexercised minds, perverted tastes, easily manipulated emotions—these are undeniable facts of the mass society; they are just as much facts as the qualities which Ralph Ellison shows were produced in Negro Americans through centuries of oppression—adding up to a "pre-individualistic" state of mind, adopted in desperate self-defense. As Ellison says:

> This pre-individualistic state is induced artificially—like the regression to primitive states noted among cultured inmates of Nazi prisons. The primary technique in its enforcement is to impress the Negro child with the omniscience and omnipotence of the whites to the point that the whites appear as ahuman as Jehovah, as relentless as the Mississippi flood.

Because Negroes are a clearly defined minority group, we see the sense of this analysis, appreciate its accuracy, and recognize the folly of supposing that the defensive responses to such treatment are in any way a measure of the potentialities of the people involved. But we do not easily apply the same sort of reasoning to the majority. Because of the subtler oppressions and distortions to which they are exposed, and because they *are* the undifferentiated majority, the great mass of people are taken as representing the norm of cultural development. Mr. Rosenberg contests this view:

> I think the answer, in one word, is to take a more respectful attitude toward our fellow man. I have never heard the disrespectful attitude more offensively presented than at a conference on mass culture some years ago, to which a wide assortment of scholars and artists were invited. Edward Shils contended that "brutal culture" perfectly suited the masses.

The rest of Mr. Rosenberg's discussion is devoted to showing that the common people respond naturally to good art, fine theatre, and the classics of literature, when they have opportunity to do so. He offers numerous illustrations of this fact, then says:

> Dedicated artists and teachers realize all this. The custodians of mass culture and their academic satraps do not. By their gross under-estimation of human potentialities they drug us beyond any hope of redemption. We must continue to do battle with them or become willing accomplices in the creation of "joyous serfdom."

It is a common assumption that what we must do to correct this situation is to put pressure on the proprietors of mass culture to offer better things to the public. But how would men who have contempt for their audiences—or their students, in the case of the academics—*know* what are the better things?

Where shall we look for help? Many people have thought that science would become a reliable guide. In the June-July *Newsletter of* the Society for Social Responsibility in Science, Benjamin De Leon tells how for years he sought to arouse in high school students a sense of "the liberating powers of science: as an educational process capable of emancipating mankind from ignorance, superstition, religious and racial hatreds, and wars," only to find that "a fairly large segment of the population feels science to be in conflict with society; holds . . . it morally irresponsible and entirely alien to the human spirit." For samples of reasons for this feeling, he recalls "the use of nerve gas in Egypt, napalm by the United States, and the extermination of six million Jews by the Germans," cited by Marquis Childs as steps "in a succession in which science has put itself at the service of death." Mr. De Leon then says:

> Strangely enough, those most responsible for generating the hostility—the scientists engaged in defense pursuits—appear to feel completely innocent of any guilt. They think of science as only a method, a means, a technique; to them it is a tool which contains no value judgment, cannot distinguish between good and evil, and is completely devoid of ethical considerations.

This shows what happens to a truth-seeking activity when it is subordinated to the motives of power. Even in popular terms, science has sacrificed both its inspiration and its dignity, having become very largely an accessory for manipulation, and reinforces the manipulators in their view that "the people" are a passive mass whose opinions and behavior must be shaped by a managerial élite.

We could hardly have a situation more opposed to education—whether of children, the young, or adults—than this. An article by Ronald Samson in *Peace News* for Aug. 2, "Tolstoy and Gandhi," suggests that nothing less than the great regenerative reforms proposed by these two can hope to alter such degrading circumstances. Mr. Samson's initial point is that both Tolstoy and Gandhi were profoundly religious: "They believed, that is to say, that life is given to man ultimately for the perfection of the soul." Both exercised enormous social influence, yet their primary interest was never in power. Mr. Samson describes Gandhi's view of politics:

> When Edwin Montagu, Liberal Secretary of State for India, sought by flattery to wean Gandhi from the political struggle by suggesting that he, an essentially religious figure, should not demean himself by engaging in politics, Gandhi replied, "I am in it because without it I cannot do any religious and social work." This is crucial. The purely political figure worships power for its own sake. The political pragmatist, who is committed to certain goals of human welfare, seeks power in order to be in a position to modify the institutional framework or change the content of legislative imperatives or in some other external fashion realise his goal of acting on the lives of his fellow men as he thinks for their good. But his basic motivation is always *will*—the quest is self-realisation through power to transform the environment which frustrates him or arouses feelings of guilt or outrage. The religious figure—as distinct from the spurious religious figure who is very much interested in power—is quite otherwise, though to those who see only the outward signs he may easily be confused with the political figure, because each takes what appears, judged externally, to be a similar political stance. "The revolutionary and the Christian," wrote Tolstoy, "are at opposite ends of an open circle. Their proximity is only apparent." . . . This did not prevent Tolstoy from respecting the political revolutionaries. He knew that they hazarded their lives in a courageous struggle against the common foe, the Tsarist autocracy, but he nevertheless deeply disapproved of their struggle to seize power. Gandhi too respected the revolutionary, preferring violence to cowardice, but insisted always that the path of duty lay in nonviolence of the brave.

It is no accident that both Tolstoy and Gandhi gave much of their lives to educational activity and planning; they saw that the world could not become better save through wiser generations in the future; and while they were both superior and vastly intelligent men, never a hint of contempt for "the masses" passed their lips. They were able to work for all the people without thinking of them as "they."

Surely it is obvious that these are true leaders of the common man—teachers who are able to close the gap between the learned and the working classes. But if we say, with Mr. Samson, that they were "religious," we must also remember, as he says, "that Tolstoy was excommunicated with full rigour by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, while Gandhi was murdered by a fanatical devotee of the Hindu Masabha for allegedly betraying Hinduism."

Both Gandhi and Tolstoy are regarded as "extremists," yet this is against a background of endless compromises, half-measures, and plausible betrayals. The offenses of which we most complain—the separation of society into class and mass, clever and ignorant, exploiters and exploited—are all consequences of failing to see both man and society whole. Mr. Samson says:

> Just as conservative-minded people try to separate Tolstoy the novelist from Tolstoy the prophet or thinker, and in doing so fail to understand either, in the same way radicals often acclaim Tolstoy or Gandhi in their political roles while rejecting their religious base. But this is not reasonable. Tolstoy and Gandhi were what they were, and achieved what they did achieve, because of their religious convictions—out of which arose their political stance and influence. The rigid committal to non-violence or reverence for life as an axiom the deliberate acceptance of all the frightening consequences and risks necessarily entailed, derived directly from their religious beliefs, and for both of them would have been bereft of meaning on any other basis.

Another conclusion we may reach is that these men found a way of beginning their work, of applying their principles, in *any* environment.

COMMENTARY
A LIFE'S COMMUNICATION

THE ruminative review of his life's thought by Arthur Morgan, in this week's lead article, brings light to other discussions in this issue. For example, in "Children," there is the question of how a modern man may use ancient philosophical conceptions for help in structuring his life. Dr. Morgan recalls the direction he obtained from the Sermon on the Mount; yet it was for him an *ingredient.* Every idea he entertained, whether old or new, had to pass before the bar of his critical judgment. He did not ever "accept" thoughts, but *forged* them. This seems the inevitable course of a man who demands honesty with himself.

The ideas—such as Necessity—which gave shape to Dr. Morgan's thinking are hardly "original." But one must add that his *synthesis* of them is unique; the synthesis is not a copy of anything else. Its life is wholly its own. It seems clear that there is no other important kind of learning for human beings.

There is a parallel, here, with what Michael Polanyi says about scientific knowledge. It is not possible, Polanyi maintains, to assemble a detailed "objective" account of what scientific discoverers have found out about the universe, because what they personally found out has in it the life and reality of their commitment; and, as he says, "You cannot formalize the act of commitment, for you cannot express your commitment non-commitally."

So with the thought of all committed men: what they say loses its wonder and its power when reduced to an inventory of separate "ideas." These ideas are but the building blocks of an edifice which must be seen whole—and the presence of a man's imagination and will is its life and true being.

This is the sort of truth which filters through from Dr. Morgan's discussion. He gives an example of a man generating in himself his own primary guides—which he can no longer, because he is "modern," take ready-made from institutions. He develops these guides by his own light, and while he can tell something about them, he cannot give them away. A man can't give his commitment to others.

There is also an application of this example to the "loaded question" spoken of by Earl Rovit (see Frontiers). A man fully engaged by commitment is simply unable to "externalize" this question. He knows it belongs to the dialogue a man can hold only with himself.

Finally, let us note that, as an educator, Dr. Morgan has spent most of his life endeavoring—with some success—to create the sort of institutions imagined by the writer of the letter in this week's "Children."

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
TOWARD NEW INSTITUTIONS

WE have a letter from a reader which seems to encompass many of the basic questions concerning reform or regeneration in education. Our correspondent starts with the human community, then turns to its institutions or schools:

> . . . the root of the problem is a communication problem, in the broadest sense—*i.e.*, there are people who are aware, self-actualizing, but how do you communicate this generally, so as to create a *culture* of the aware? My answer is to create groups which impart the awareness on an immediate basis; and, secondly, institutions, to catch the awareness into or in social forms. Now perhaps one might argue that one cannot catch awareness in institutions. This is a subtle and fascinating question, and my response, in outline, is: No, you can't really institutionalize awareness; each person must work out his own salvation in the sense of enlightenment. Yet, conceivably you can shift the whole arena in which the enlightenment-process works itself out, and institutionalize the *idea* of enlightenment, thus giving this idea prominence in the context of the existing culture. One would have to go further, ultimately, and create basically new institutions in every sphere—not so much to "enlighten," as to create the conditions for liberation and consequent enlightenment. Now, in the society we have, these conditions are not present, and so only the very rare person embarks on this kind of quest.
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> Thus, to go back to the original idea, institutions communicate values and expectations; they are a powerful communicative vehicle, even if the communication is largely unconscious and non-verbal. Think of John Holt's work on the difference between what schools teach and what they communicate, in *How Children Fail.* Schools are implicitly powerful vehicles of socialization into the existing values of the culture, and inculcate the kind of authoritarianism and unfreedom that we seem to want to have propagated in our culture.

This reader seems to be envisioning a culture which is both the repository of humanizing literature and a pervasive atmosphere of striving, of idealism. These qualities are suffused in all the institutions, but they are never codified, never reduced to rubrics or "packaged" by educational "experts" who feel able to substitute their judgment for the actual growth-processes in other human beings.

Actually, history affords many limited examples of this sort of culture—no one of them, doubtless, adequate to our present need, yet all illustrative of the working principles involved. As Arthur Morgan, lifelong student of community educational dynamics, noted years ago, Fielding Hall's book, *The Soul of a People,*—the story of Burmese life in the nineteenth century—is a remarkable account of the educational influence of coherent organic culture. Laura Thompson's *The Hopi Way* has similar value. Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* is filled with examples of old institutions embodying both vision and doctrines of commitment.

Great scriptures such as the *Tao Te King,* the *Upanishads,* the *Bhagavad-Gita,* and philosophic works such as the dialogues of Plato and the writings of Plotinus are either foundation works on which such cultures are based, or questioning investigations of how they may be established. The letter of our reader might be regarded as a clear recognition of the need for this sort of "classical" influence, converted into socio-ideative function. It must be admitted, of course, that the age we speak of as "modern"—partly the result of the scientific revolution, but perhaps more fundamentally described as a spurting growth in self-consciousness—has placed certain barriers in the way of a merely doctrinal return to old metaphysical systems. There is probably a sense in which we will return to these ancient springs, but this will require rendering the dynamics of self-knowledge and human growth into a language more intimately related to the emerging psychological maturities of our time. The problem was well put by Robert Redfield in *The Primitive World and its Transformations,* in which he speaks of the modern breakdown of belief in a universe of "Immanent Justice." A deep, pantheistic sense of the unity of all life gave the ancient world its cultural unity, its sense of the intrinsic morality in all human acts, and led to wonderfully complex symbolic representation, in the world of economic and social activities, of primeval processes. All life was instinct with educational

analogues in many of these ancient cultures. This has been put in a few lines by Richard Hertz in *Man on a Rock:*

> Chinese peasants, moving into the mountains every morning to gather tea, sang a hymn in honor of their enterprise, which they compared to a pilgrimage to the Western paradise. The Volga boatmen "accepted the universe," and the women of Madagascar acted, when they cultivated the rice fields, like bayaderes trying to please a god.
>
> Miguel Covarrubias, in his book on Bali, describes the bandiars, or cooperative societies as we would call them in our dry idiom; they watched the magic of work unfold with proper art and majesty in their Indonesian eden; when night fell they sent the arpeggios of their tireless orchestras through fragrant vales. . . .

It is enough to moisten the eyes of modern, alienated man, simply to contemplate the splendor of these ancient devotions, to feel, however remotely, their harmonizing effect, and to recognize the austere philosophy and even abstract cosmology on which these customs rest. Yet we remain on the outside looking in—or back; what we feel is something like Tolstoy's longing to share in the faith of his wonderful peasants—but this comparison is somewhat inaccurate, since, despite allegory and colorful embellishment, these ancient systems will challenge and absorb the highest intellectual powers, while Greek Orthodoxy cannot. But the problem as stated by Redfield must be considered:

> If we compare the primary world view that has been sketched in these pages with that which comes to prevail in modern times, especially in the West, where science has been so influential, we may recognize one of the great transformations of the human mind. It is that transformation by which the primitive world has been overturned. . . . Man comes out of the unity of the universe within which he is oriented now as something separate from nature and comes to confront nature as something with physical qualities only, upon which he may work his will. As this happens, the universe loses its moral character and becomes to him indifferent, uncaring of man.

We might put those last words differently—saying rather that we have become men uncaring of the universe. But there has been an accompanying change of positive value—a heightened self-consciousness, and a determined search for meaning on the part of individuals, joined with a literal *inability* to accept the conclusions of transmitted authority. (See *The Modern Tradition,* Ellmann and Feidelson, Oxford University Press.)

All this is a way of saying, we suppose, that in the modern age we need to act out for ourselves the dialogues of Plato's *Republic,* and in the grain of our distrust of institutional rigidity. Perhaps not everyone is able to do this, but if everyone who *is* able were to do it, we might find structure and substance for a new kind of human community and schools emerging much sooner than we think.

Yet it would be a mistake to suppose there are no clues in ancient thought concerning the continual need to question the *forms* of institutional or cultural communication. The true hero is always charged with the responsibility of going beyond doctrine and time-bound cultural image. This is found in the words of Jesus to his disciples, and has its most suggestive expression in the second chapter of the *BagavadGita:*

> When thy heart shall have worked through the snares of delusion, then wilt thou attain to high indifference as to those doctrines which are already taught or which are yet to be taught. When thy mind once liberated from the Vedas shall be fixed immovably in contemplation, then shalt thou attain to devotion.

It is this struggle to learn, partly *through* doctrine—which is all that institutions can impart—how to become *free* of doctrine, that is the essential process of education. All the modern paradoxes are implicit in this idea—the paradox confronting Ivan Karamazov, Camus' Rebel, and the tensions in the writings of Tolstoy. Every educational situation can be turned into a medium for this sort of realization. We don't really need, and cannot get, new institutions first; we need people who find ways to use existing situations for these profound, regenerative purposes; for then new and better institutions will very nearly come of themselves—as, indeed, they ought.

FRONTIERS

Has Self a Role?

> The Self-Being pierced the opening outwards; hence one looks outward, not within himself. A wise man looked towards the Self with reverted sight, seeking deathlessness.
>
> Children seek after outward desires; they come to the net of widespread death. But the wise, beholding deathlessness seek not for the enduring among unenduring things.
>
> —*Katha Upanishad*

THIS is an ancient saying, promising things a modern man has difficulty in imagining, to say nothing of hoping for. "Deathlessness" hardly seems a reasonable goal, when breakup and breakdown are the modes of the changes we experience most, and when massive death is the major achievement of our science. Yet the Upanishadic affirmation seems germinal to the credo of the age now in birth; and the idiom of pioneering thought is filled with words which have a value-equivalence to deathlessness.

Meanwhile, in the arts, a kind of egotropic frenzy contests the limits of symbolic representation. It is not without significance that impatient men who find the search for self becoming a fashion preach the curious doctrine that narcotized and sodden bodies will enable us to objectify the flights of the soul. Men have tried before to flog themselves up to the heavenly condition, but now the whips are instruments of pleasure instead of pain. Truth is named ecstacy, and anything which destroys the confinements of mortal life is hailed as a catalyst of salvation—the self will appear if you bury your head in some hallucinatory sand. A1though, tomorrow, the cold hell of objective existence will return with reinforcements, that is for tomorrow, and we are winning "timelessness" today.

Addiction to these beguiling doctrines may be one of the penalties of too long a worship of "objectivity." For a man who has always looked for truth "out there" might easily persuade himself that the subject isn't real unless it dresses up and performs like an object—something you can really *see.* There are various ways to read the moral of Hesse's *Journey to the East,* and rejecting the temptation to define liberation by the terms of subtler imprisonments is among them.

But how can a man know or tell what is the right thing to do? Well, he can admit to himself, first, that, as a member of a society which idolizes commodities and devotes its "creativity" to marketing, his judgment is likely to be somewhat biased at the start; and that even his philosophizing may be affected by these externalizing habits of mind. He may suppose, for example, that he inaugarates great reforms by adopting a changed evaluation of the elements and processes of the external world, when what he ought to do is turn his attention toward himself. Has *he,* because of his intrinsic nature, certain obligations and possibilities, regardless of his environment and no matter what are the prevailing definitions and theories of the external world? If, as is now proclaimed, the human subject makes a crucial contribution to all ideas about the world—if a coefficient of his own subjectivity affects everything he thinks and does—then, surely, it will make a great difference whether he thinks of himself as a student of endlessly differentiated circumstances, or as a committed entrepreneur, a Promethean adventurer.

Without a sense of role—or even of destiny—a man may easily fall again into the habit of thinking of himself as a glorified "consumer," intent upon rising to new and more delectable levels of consumption. A very special egotism this, but seldom disowned or contradicted by the refinements of modern sophistication.

This *smorgasbord* approach to experience is almost never subjected to serious criticism. Yet it has ultimately bewildering and finally self-destructive effects. In a remarkably perceptive paper, "On the Contemporary Apocalyptic Imagination," in the Summer *American Scholar,* Earl Rovit explores a characteristic attitude which may be traced to this source:

> Recently I have been struck by the frequency, variety and intensity of . . . a deceptively simple, thoroughly loaded question: Why *not?* Once my mind became attuned to its resonances, I seemed able to discern it at or near the root of every radical dissension of which I was aware. In art, in science, in politics. Over and over again in the classroom, in dissident social discussions, in my own introspective dialogues, in any situation where the utility or justification of an action was under deliberation. But *why not?* is not so much a question as it is an answer, or, better still, a declaration of polymorphous intent. It seems to be the instinctive response of a large segment of our collective mind to any expression of restriction, prohibition, formal limitation. Thou shalt not commit a disrespect to thine elders, thy conventional pieties, thy tradition. Why not? Thou shalt not murder with napalm or enslave with sanctimonious fetters. Why not? Thou shalt not venture into inner or outer space with impunity. Why not? Here is a boundary line; this limitation cannot be broken. Why not?

One might quote Louis Armstrong—If you have to ask, you'll never know. People who seriously expect other people to answer this question for them have no self-knowledge and are not about to get any. For, as Mr. Rovit puts it, after his seminal discussion:

> The apocalyptic ethic utters a challenging command: "Distrust thyself!" it says. "Trust rather in thy congeries of selves. Look to the peripheries of thy being, for that is where life exists, not in some hollow center."

Why should the inner self seem hollow to these people? Because, it must be answered, they have given its subtle being, its incommensurable potentialities, no attention. Self-knowledge is a human creation—it is not passively "there," waiting to be discovered.