

IN QUEST OF THEMSELVES

IT sometimes seems that the most important agreements among human beings are obtained through their contradictions of one another on matters of less importance. Take for example the idea of Man. Can we have a general conception of the nature and beinghood of humans? Loren Eiseley, in a recent *Saturday Review/World* (Feb. 23), says that we can't. After repeating his case for the negative, we'll present a contradicting view. Dr. Eiseley's reasons for objecting to what could be called a "Platonic idea" of Man will be evident in the following:

Take the word *Man*, for example. There are times when it is useful to categorize the creature briefly, his history, his embracing characteristics. From this, if we are not careful of our meanings, it becomes easy to speak of all men as though they were one person. In reality men have been seeking this unreal man for thousands of years. They have found him bathed in blood, they have found him in the hermit's cell, he has been glimpsed among innumerable messiahs, or in meditation under the sacred bo tree; he has been found in the physician's study or lit by the satanic fires of the first atomic explosion.

In reality, he has never been found at all. The reason is very simple: Men have been seeking Man capitalized, an imaginary creature constructed out of disparate parts in the laboratory of the human imagination. Some men may thus perceive him and see him as either totally beneficent or wholly evil. They would be wrong. They are wrong so long as they have vitalized this creation and call it Man. There is no Man; there are only men: good, evil, inconceivable mixtures marred by their genetic makeup, scarred or improved by their societal surroundings. So long as they live, they are *men*, multitudinous and unspent potential for action. Men are great objects of study, but the moment we say *Man* we are in danger of wandering into a swamp of abstraction.

Dr. Eiseley is very persuasive. How could anyone possibly disagree with this practical common sense? Yet in behalf of that possibility,

we call the Greek poet, Archilochus, as witness. He said: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." The fox, quite evidently, is of the scientific school. He (in this case Dr. Eiseley) knows many things—plain facts, you could say. The hedgehog is a Platonic philosopher who rejoices in unifying generalizations and big intuitions. Can, then, a Platonic view of Man be justified?

We dare not, says Eiseley, adopt a fixed generality about man. Men are too dissimilar—especially in their moral qualities, but also in their intellectual abilities and thought. Well, why can't we have a generality about man which declares all this diversity: Man is the being *without* a fixed nature? That, it may be said, is not a comfortable sort of generalization; its meaning is in flux. It implies that man is chameleon in nature, protean in character. A definition is supposed to *define*. But if man *is* protean, then his definition must admit or affirm this. Whose convenience or comfort are we serving? Do we want pleasantly familiar definitions or an introduction to what may be the truth?

The objection may be made that an unfixed conception of man will be too vague to have utility. Then let us consider such a definition which already exists. One was made by Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (composed about 1487). In this account of man's nature (available in a Gateway paperback), Pico has the Creator or Artificer explain his intentions:

We have given you, Oh Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor any endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to

whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.

A little later, Pico speaks of the apex of human realization as the philosopher, one "wholly withdrawn into the inner chambers of the mind"—who, he says, "is neither a creature of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed with human flesh." Then he asks:

Who then will not look with wonder upon man, upon man who, not without reason, in the sacred Mosaic and Christian writings, is designated sometimes by the term "all flesh" and sometimes by the term "every creature," because he molds, fashions and transforms himself into the likeness of all flesh and assumes the characteristic power of every form of life? This is why Evantes the Persian in his exposition of the Chaldean theology, writes that man has no inborn and proper semblance, but many which are extraneous and adventitious: whence the Chaldean saying:—"man is a living creature of varied, multiform and ever-changing nature.

Two comments may be made. First, Pico is celebrating the unique potentialities of Man, filled with admiration for his versatility and the fact of his self-determination; indeed, this quality of being shaper of his own destiny *is* the dignity of man, in Pico's view. Pico's eloquence is grandly affirmative, almost hymn-like in his appreciation of the splendor of man's ideal being.

But what goes with this glorious freedom? In the moral universe, quite obviously, the possibility of failure and degradation is an aspect of freedom. Pico notes this but does not dwell on it extensively. He chooses to summon his readers to noble achievement.

The other thing to be noted is the difficulty with which we conceive of a "Platonic Form" or Idea that represents, not any particular choice, but the possibility of choosing; not a given act or creation, but the capacity to undertake any one of an endless variety of acts and creations. How do you typify this quality? Every symbolic "image" belies the freedom of human intelligence to decide upon some other! Accordingly, the idea of man is and must remain an "abstract" idea. And if all other forms of life have fixed-species images, the idea of Man as the being who makes his own, just as he wills, has both great and identifiable distinction. He is set apart, like no other intelligence in nature. This definition of man, in short, is faithful, if abstract; indeed, it achieves fidelity by remaining abstract.

Returning to Dr. Eiseley's essay in *Saturday Review/World*, we find him in what seems essential agreement with Pico, although his language is different and his mood, unlike Pico's, melancholy. A man of the twentieth century, you could say, is entitled to some melancholy on the subject of human freedom. He begins with a reminiscence of the questions which haunted his youth:

Who am I? Why am I here? What is the nature of my kind? What is growing up? What is the world? How long shall I live in it? Where shall I go?

He brought these questions to his father on the occasion of having found a dead turtle in a river, wantonly shot for sport by a passerby. His father replied by telling a story—the story of man—after the fashion of the Plains Indians. It was the story of an "orphan," a lonely, lost boy who did not know by instinct, as other creatures did, what he must do. The grain of life did not instruct him; Mother Earth was often silent. The old ones among the fathers, men who went without food and had visions on hill-tops, were all gone, their guiding knowledge with them. The boy was alone.

"Papa," Eiseley muses, "was right."

Because man was truly an orphan and confined to no single way of life, he was, in essence, a prison-breaker. But in ignorance his very knowledge sometimes led from one terrible prison to another. Was the final problem, then, to escape himself, or, if not that, to reconcile his devastating intellect with his heart?

By turning science into myth, and using the myth for instruction in man's nature, Dr. Eiseley makes science more than science. He has his scientists say to the Orphan inquirer, who seeks to understand himself, that even the strange teachings of science about human origins are a fairy tale. They are a fairy tale, but "so is the world and so is life." And that, they explain, "is what makes it true."

Life is indefinite departure. That is why we are all orphans. That is why you must find your own way. Life is no stable. Everything alive is slipping through cracks and crevices in time, changing as it goes. Other creatures, however have instincts that provide for them, holes in which to hide. They cannot ask questions. A fox is a fox, a wolf is a wolf even if this, too, is illusion. You have learned to ask questions. That is why you are an orphan. *You are the only creature in the universe who knows what it has been.* Now you must go on asking questions while all the time you are changing. You will ask what you are to become. The world will no longer satisfy you. You must find your own way your own true self.

Yet man has one great gift—the gift of imagination; or, as Eiseley says, the gift of language, the power to symbolize, to invent representative meanings and to put them into general ideas. And this, he says, is a magic secret. The myth-making scientists tell the Orphan:

You use language. You are a symbol-shifter. All this is hidden in your brain and transmitted from one generation to another. You are a time-binder, in your head the symbols that mean things in the world outside can fly about untrammelled. You can combine them differently into a new world of thought. . . . Thus out of words, a puff of air, really, is made all that is uniquely human, all that is new from one human generation to another.

Plato spoke of the confinement of earthly bodies, in which the human soul is tenant and

prisoner. Eiseley speaks of the "wounds of evolution"—the old brain we have in common with animals, containing centers which incite to angry action, to aggression and violence which the "new brain," the neocortex where deliberative intelligence is exercised, tries to control. "Thus there are times when the Orphan is a divided being striving against himself."

No wonder Dr. Eiseley had difficulty with any simple statement as a description of man, for who knows what he will do next—what man will become? He is not programmed in a predictable way, and he has a continuous part, though often an unknown or unrecognized part, in his own progressive creation; which is to say, in his future. So, in his way, Dr. Eiseley agrees with Pico. Man makes himself. That is the general conception which applies to man, although it seems far too easy to say.

Yet recalling wise sayings from time to time is a means of raising platitudes to high meanings. Dr. Eiseley finds an old profundity worth repeating:

Long ago, however, in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls hidden in the Judean Desert, an unknown scribe had written: "None there be, can rehearse the whole tale." That phrase too, contains the warning that man is an orphan of uncertain beginnings and an indefinite ending. . . . man's road is to be sought beyond himself. *No man there is who can tell the whole tale.* After the small passage of 2000 years who would deny this truth?

What does this mean? Explaining it is hazardous, since, as Whitehead remarked: "There is not a sentence which adequately states its own meaning. There is always a background of presuppositions which defies analysis by reason of its own infinitude." Well, we can make a stab at explaining the inscription on the scroll, since we have determined man's leading characteristic. It must mean that the *whole* of the future is unpredictable. We can say quite a lot about the confrontations to be met by men in the future, but how men will meet them remains obscure. And although we can make predictions of future

human choice on the basis of statistical probability, extrapolating from what we know of past decisions, to regard such predictions as certainties would amount to the abolition of man. A wholly predictable creature is not free.

When Dr. Eiseley calls man a prison-breaker, he also means that he is an iconoclast—a breaker of images of himself. Man will not be contained by anyone's prediction. This is by reason of the timeless, incommensurable component of his nature. A being who can introduce discontinuity into the chains of cause and effect—who can make new beginnings—is somehow both inside and outside the system of world life. He is both the creator and the created—now and then the created, but *always* the creator. Of his timeless aspect he can know only that *it is*; while of his time-bound nature he can know what it does, which means that he can obtain a grasp of history. He is "*the only creature in the universe who knows what it has been.*"

What, in essence, is history? Or why are men so deeply concerned with it? They are, it seems, looking for clues. They want to know about themselves, and hope to find out about themselves from study of what they have done. History-writing, then, is a kind of contest between historians who want to make men predictable, and those other, more lonely historians who want to declare him free. The two schools write very different histories, finding different things important to record and discuss. The conception of the nature of man is a crucial "selector" when it comes to the writing of history. Distillations from history on the nature of man are therefore its most important conclusions—from the *Mahabharata* (including the *Bhagavad-Gita*) to Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor tale.

But because the background of men's presuppositions, referred to by Whitehead, changes from age to age, we feel confident that *something* besides the confirmation of timeless truth is happening during the passage of time. And these changes also require that history be

written again and again. There seem to be gains in the subtlety of human awareness and increases in the scope of man's perception. Such transformations bring both delighting discovery and fearful pain.

Dr. Eiseley makes it clear that our knowledge is always in vital process. What we know has meaning only as it increases in application. The road, as Cervantes said, is better than the inn. Turning to great changes, he says:

. . . beginning about 350 years ago, thoughts unventured upon since the time of the Greek philosophers began to enter human consciousness. They may be summed up in Francis Bacon's dictum: "This is the foundation of all. We are not to imagine or suppose, but to *discover*, what nature does or may be made to do."

When, in following years, scientific experiment and observation became current, a vast change began to pass over Western thought. Man's conception of himself and his world began to alter beyond recall. "Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone," exclaimed the poet John Donne, Bacon's contemporary. The existing world was crumbling at the edges. It was cracking apart like an ill-nailed raft in a torrent—a torrent of incredible time. It was, in effect, a new nature comprising a past embedded in the present and a future yet to be.

Donne, an early contemporary of Descartes, mourned the loss, the fragmenting, of the fabric of presuppositions of his time, sometimes called the Elizabethan World View. Today, more than three hundred years later, we tremble at the dissolution of the Cartesian world of objective, natural fact, and at the uncontrolled world of Baconian discovery, conquest, and power, which threatens both men and their planetary host. André Malraux has put the present-day anguish in a few sentences:

At the core of Western civilization there is a hopeless contradiction, in whatever shape we discover it: that between man and what he has created. This conflict between the thinker and his thought, between the European and his civilization or his reality, between the indiscriminate consciousness and its expression in the everyday world through everyday means—I find it in every aspect of contemporary life.

Sweeping away facts and finally, itself, this spirit of contradiction trains our consciousness to give way and prepares us for the metallic realms of the absurd.

...

Our thought is falling in ruins. . . . we are becoming conscious of the profound opposition between our acts and our inner lives. . . . Western intellect has abolished all which might have stood in the path of Man: having reached the limit of its efforts, it finds only death, like Rancé before the corpse of his mistress. It discovers that it can no longer be enamored of the vision it has at last achieved. Never has there been as disquieting a discovery. . . .

What then can we say is the lesson of our recent history? Surely it is that we have been making bad definitions of ourselves. We have acted and invented as though we had no immortal, eternal, timeless component—as though we could only strut, fret, fabricate, then die and never be again.

Dr. Eiseley, too, senses the disparity between what we are and what we do or plan to do. He finds *hubris* in the assumption by certain biologists that because we can build cities and manipulate the lives of populations, the time has come to remodel men.

Why not ourselves? Is it not in our power to perpetuate great minds ad infinitum? But who is to judge? Who is to select this future man? There is the problem. Which of us poor orphans by the roadside, even those peering learnedly through the electron microscope, can be confident of the way into the future? . . .

If the scalpel, the excising laser ray in the laboratory, were placed in the hands of some one man, some one poor orphan, what would he do? If assured would he reproduce himself alone? If cruel, would he by indirection succeed in abolishing the living world? If doubtful of the road, would he reproduce doubt? "Nothing is more shameful than assertion without knowledge," a great Roman, Cicero, once pronounced as though he had foreseen this final bridge of human pride—the pride of a god without foresight.

His point is well made, but Dr. Eiseley seems an optimist in supposing that a biologist might be interested in planting anything so authentically

human as "doubt" in his revised version of man. A *Time* (April 19, 1971) report on what these vital engineers contemplate doing said that they thought man could perhaps use a larger head containing more brain cells, or that an extra thumb and protruding eyes would increase dexterity; and one, more imaginative than the others, thought of giving humans "two stomachs," since coming food shortages may require us to eat grass like cows. Plainly enough, the biologists believe that man is "nothing but" his biological endowment.

Happily, other life-science specialists inform us that the geneticists and scalpel-minded surgeons don't really have the knowledge to do any of these things—yet. But that they want to is serious enough, since this may amount to the most dangerous misdefinition of man the age has produced. Men are self-definers, and certain scientists, as scientists, seem willing to make a radical monopoly of their technical, biological definition of man. While altering a gene or two might not destroy us, letting them do it might be an ultimate corruption—because of the abdication from human decision involved—for then we should lose control over our destiny as surely as we would by placing it in the hands of the Grand Inquisitor.

This is the sort of confrontation our history is unfolding, presenting crucial decisions for us to make. Self-knowledge is essential to choosing rightly—consistently with our nature and possibilities—and more secure self-knowledge will doubtless be the fruit of the present cycle of history, if we are able to avoid fatal mistakes.

REVIEW

THE DOMINANT REALITIES

INCREASINGLY, the best and most pertinent books are concerned with how we think about the world and ourselves, rather than with the world and the "facts" of life. The objective facts, whatever they are, are persistently there, and we adjust to and deal with them because we must; but the way we think is the part of our lives that is subject to change, even to control, and our happiness or unhappiness, our feelings of success or failure, seem to depend more upon our thinking than on anything else. What are the influential books of recent years? William Irwin Thompson's *At the Edge of History*, Charles Reich's *Greening of America*, Mumford's *Myth of the Machine*, and Roszak's *Where the Wasteland Ends* are among the most important, and they all deal primarily with how men think about the world and themselves.

Richard N. Goodwin's three-part article in the *New Yorker* (Jan. 21, 28, Feb. 4), taken from his book, *The American Condition* (Doubleday), can easily stand with the studies named above, since it, too, is a perceptive account of the transitions in thinking about human goals, processes, and problems. Goodwin, who was once closely associated with John Kennedy as an adviser, can be labeled a political commentator or thinker, but this is misleading. While he starts out in terms of political categories—he sets the stage for examination of American ideas by quoting from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson—he soon broadens out into what may be called intellectual history of the idea of freedom, attempting to show the effects on modern life of the leading beliefs of the modern age. The weakness of this essay—if so critically brilliant a work needs to have its weakness identified—is the absence of a conscious moral base, or an open declaration of that base, since the strength of the criticism rests upon an ideal conception of human community. This is described in some detail and identified as a "natural order" from which men

have departed, but there is no articulate advocacy of philosophical principle and thought (except for a hint or two) which might help to lead people in this direction. We may have here some evidence of the flaw in very nearly all political thinking, which can hardly seek out first principles without ceasing to be political. By reason of his clear moral inspiration, Mr. Goodwin does retire from the category of political theory—since he says right out that nothing important can be accomplished by politics—but he does not say very much about what else we should do, except for abstract statements about an ideal society. His points are mainly a disclosure of what we have done and are doing that is wrong. Actually, he has much in common with Jacques Ellul, who regards the pattern of technology as a demon which has obsessed and now dominates modern society—an invading power over which we have almost no control. Goodwin also writes about an obsession which has taken charge, but for him the demon is made up of the static habits, rigid procedures, and self-perpetuating mechanisms of bureaucracy.

In his diagnosis, the trouble begins when men lose their metaphysical and moral views of order, putting in their place the (morally) random universe of science, the rule of appetite in deciding on the good, and the idea of freedom as uninhibited "self-expression." A brief definition of what has happened is given in the following:

A society of any complexity cannot be regulated by the fragmented will of isolated individuals. If individuals are not controlled by one another, as subjects and objects of a reciprocal authority that is derived from common values and from participation in the structures of a common life, they must be ruled from without—not simply by others but by insensate process, by the necessities of material institutions. The united will that is required to regulate the social process is necessarily transferred (alienated) to an external authority.

Then, as a result of the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, the "organic unities" of traditional institutions and relationships were sundered, the moral web of life broke down. The

quality of Mr. Goodwin's analysis is evident in this passage:

The new class and urban life developed together, but surplus wealth in the form of money began to corrode the medieval structure far beyond the ports and centers of manufacture. As money took on independent value, personal obligations could be fulfilled through payment—cash instead of services, gold instead of horses and bowmen. Deeply personal ties, which had extruded the consciousness of the age, a mode of thought, and a structure of values and perceptions, metamorphosed into commercial bonds. You no longer owed yourself; you owed money. The spirit of commerce gradually infiltrated extensive regions of social life which had not received the benefits of increasing wealth; ascendant beliefs overtook those who were excluded from the new possibilities—who were still captive in the feudal relationships. This invasion came armed with the powerful, liberating idea of value. Once obligations had value, once they could be priced, then the fact of payment overshadowed, and ultimately displaced, the identity of the debtor. The new kind of debt was impersonal, even transferable. Lordship over the land was no longer one of mingled strands in a web of personal obligations but something of calculable value whose earning, in short, could be used to pay taxes rather than homage. But value was not the thing itself. It implied exchange, and the power to exchange was ownership. The lord who held the land became the owner. The earth was transmuted into capital, its produce into income and income into goods—not only to maintain life but to bring comfort, pleasure, luxury, beauty. The powerful sought ownership in addition to power and, finally, as a source of added power.

Man, in short, was no longer in bondage to his earthly needs. The bondage was now to the abstraction of power, and this was mistaken as the means to fulfillment and freedom. Others have written well concerning the effects of this great change in men's thinking. Wendell Berry, in *The Hidden Wound*, describes at length the self-mutilation of the American farmer which came as a result of "owning" the land, as distinguished from knowing and working it. He could no longer "love" the land, since ownership, for the small farmer, became a nightmare of financial responsibilities. Money was the tyrant as well as the mythical liberator. The disintegration of the

sense of meaning in a life well lived went on and on, until making money became the symbol of success, morality, and the goal of existence. John Schaar made related comment in his *New American Writing* essay (No. 8):

We have no mainstream political or moral teaching that tells men they must remain bound to each other even one step beyond the point where those bonds are a drag and a burden on one's personal desires. Americans have always been dedicated to "getting ahead"; and getting ahead always meant leaving others behind.

The private desire has very largely become the instrument of liberation—its satisfaction the moral imperative of the age. Goodwin sees this in relation to the depersonalized economic processes of the time:

Moreover, the reach of modern economic relationships with the affluence it has produced, has attenuated the link between particular forms of social existence, such as community, family, and economic necessity. Commitments that are willed and easily escaped lose their binding force. Many of the most radical forms of modern social behavior—"freedom" of sex and dress, of drugs and pornography, the quest for pleasure and for new forms of self-realization, from consciousness-raising to meditation—can be seen as manifestations of a belief that fulfillment is to be sought in the gratification of private desires through internal states rather than through social bonds.

Much of this essay is devoted to an examination of the change from capitalism and free enterprise to a system in which bureaucracy is the principal identifying characteristic. Bureaucracy attenuates both the motives and processes of enterprise, diminishing efficiency, rendering competition an ineffectual spur, and enthroning habit and conformity. Goodwin shows how the traits of bureaucracy in government have now been largely acquired by business, which has grown so large as to be organizationally very much the same as government in many of its operations. The result, in effect, is a general incapacity to innovate, and an automatic resistance to change, however beneficial. Goodwin is at his strongest and most emphatic in

exposing the folly in expectations of constructive change from the political process, per se:

We are not victims of perfectible weaknesses in the social structure. Our humanity is being consumed by the structure itself: by the ruling constituents—the institutions, the relationships, the consciousness, and the ideology—of the process that contains modern America. Our possibilities and our awareness of possibility are mutilated by the growing strength and effectiveness of that process. Our afflictions cannot be subdued by repairs or modifications, by those adjustments we call "reforms." For us, a political faith is not a useful and salutary illusion—it is an accomplice in oppression The political faith turns us aside from contemplation of fundamental disorders, lures discontent and anger to the pursuit of the "practical"—which is used to mean victories and rewards that politics can offer. These do not include basic social change. . . .

Any political structure, however devised, will reflect the dominant realities of private life. Were the entire population to participate via cable television in drafting new fundamental laws, economic relations would remain essentially unchanged, although political powers of repression might be enlarged. This outcome would be the consequence not of mass ignorance, fear, or narrowness but of a false premise, the belief that politics can create power, when in fact it can only accommodate the competing claims of existing power.

It seems evident that Mr. Goodwin has some conception of beneficent human attitudes which he speaks of generally as "shared human purposes," in a brief passage contrasting the existing with a "natural" order:

Once the national society that contains us is no longer experienced as a vehicle of shared social purpose, its authority over our lives also becomes external—is made coercive. It becomes a source of alienation. The consequent sense of impotence feeds on itself, increasing the withdrawal that strengthens the autonomy of the state. The same is true of our relationship to all ruling institutions. The requirements and obligations of shared social existence are not coercive. They are aspects of a natural order. The relationship of the individual to that order is not one of participation; it is an aspect of self, a constituent of human nature. As a consequence of social fragmentation, power that, being shared, was formerly also personal is

externalized. External relations are substituted for the human connection. No longer ruled by one another, we no longer rule ourselves.

The reach of this discussion is quite evidently toward a fundamental faith that will provide the basis for a natural order. In his first installment, Mr. Goodwin quotes from Plato: "The just man sets in order his own inner life, and is his own master and his own law, and at peace with himself." By this means, the man gains mastery over his social existence, and may be said to be free. He gains this mastery because he sees that an ordered personal life is a life which shares in common social purposes. In Goodwin's view, a society made up of persons of this sort would "require a transformation of the entire social process, a redirection of our social forces and institutions." How is this to be accomplished? At the outset, surely, by beginning to do the sort of thinking about ourselves and the world that is consistent with such a common realization. This thinking needs identification in more specific terms. For it to be effective, an entire universe of discourse, growing out of deep conviction, seems a practical necessity.

COMMENTARY IN ADDITION . . .

LOREN EISELEY'S *Saturday Review/World* essay on the nature of man, quoted in this week's lead, first appeared in "the one-volume *Propaedia* or *Outline of Knowledge* of the new fifteenth edition of the new *Encyclopaedia Britannica*," according to an *SR/W* editor's note. If other essays in this volume are of similar excellence, it may bear looking into!

In "Children . . . and Ourselves," the discussion of the *Mahabharata* recalls Elizabeth Seeger's belief that such great works of literature belong only to "the dawn of the world, when everything was new." Whatever the truth about this, we certainly live in a world that needs and longs for a new dawn; and we may suspect that, whatever dawn may come, it will be a work of men rather than of "the old gods," since those gods, whatever and wherever they are, have probably tired of looking after so stubbornly infantile a cosmic neighborhood as ours. Yet, conceivably, they might be drawn to us once more if we can begin to behave like men—or gods in the making.

We came across what seems a good tail-piece to go with the *Working Papers* reviews of land abuse in the United States in *Frontiers*. Americans who feel put-upon by population congestion and are alarmed by the prospects of further growth might consider the following statistic, taken from E. F. Schumacher's column in the November-December *Resurgence*:

It has been asserted that "the United States is the most seriously overpopulated nation in the world today." How could this be? If you were to put the entire world population into the United States—mind what I am saying: *everybody*, the whole of China, India, Europe, etc., etc.—the density of population in the United States, expressed as number of persons per square mile, would still be only about the same as it is in England now. Hard to believe but true; I have just checked it. So how can the United States be the most seriously overpopulated nation in the world today? Only if you define "overpopulated" in a somewhat

peculiar way, namely, as "that nation whose people by virtue of their numbers and activities are most rapidly decreasing the ability of the land to support human life." In these terms, densely packed England is undoubtedly much less overpopulated than the United States with its unbelievably large open spaces. Obviously, therefore, it is not so much numbers but activities that matter most: if the activities changed the numbers might be no problem; but if the activities remained, even smaller numbers would be no solution.

CHILDREN ... and Ourselves MAHABHARATA

IN these unheroic times, a book which should help to restore the classic and noble vision of the world is especially welcome. This was our first thought on receiving from the University of California Press a copy of *Mahabharata*, as retold by William Buck (440 pages, \$10.00). But as for "reviewing" the *Mahabharata*—even though this rendition is only one tenth the size of the original—one might as readily attempt to review the universe! In Sanskrit, as first recorded, this extraordinary epic is the longest work of literature ever written, and it may also be the greatest. In the introduction to her young people's version, Elizabeth Seeger says that "it is three times as long as the Bible and eight times as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together," and that "for two or three thousand years the story that forms its nucleus has been the vehicle for the moral philosophy and for the highest spiritual teaching of Hinduism." It has been called "the storehouse of genealogy, mythology, and antiquity." Miss Seeger adds that without a knowledge of the *Mahabharata* a reader can no more understand the civilizations and culture of Asia than he could appreciate the arts and literature of Europe without knowing the Greek myths and the Bible. Today, as the world grows into unity, this extraordinary classic of the East is becoming our heritage, too.

The story of how this expression of the *Mahabharata* in English came to be written is of interest. Bill Buck, the publisher's preface informs us, in 1955 came across an elaborate nineteenth-century edition of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in a library in Carson City, Nevada. Its philosophic power so impressed him that he determined to make the larger setting of the *Gita* available in English to Western readers. He died fifteen years later, at thirty-five, having completed his rendition of the *Mahabharata*, one of the *Ramayana*, and worked

on but not finished the manuscript of the *Harivamsa*. Bill Buck loved, it is said, "the friendship between Krishna and Arjuna, the ancient bond of which Krishna could remember all the incarnations, although they were obscure to Arjuna." He tried to preserve as much of the original spirit of the story as he could, while omitting long digressions and passages which seemed to him "treatises of special interests." In his words:

My method in writing both *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* was to begin with a literal translation from which to extract the story, and then to tell that story in an interesting way that would preserve the spirit and flavor of the original. . . . My motive is therefore that of a story-teller.

Knowledgeable readers may object to some of the omissions, but one thing seems certain: if the work had not been shortened it would have practically no readers at all. While the speech is "modernized," Mr. Buck's choice of words gives little offense, and he seems to have been able to generate something of the grandeur of this ancient spectacle. One omission which some may regret is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is, so to speak, the "soul" of the *Mahabharata*, even its *raison d'être*. Yet there is a sense in which the *Gita* stands alone; its greatness can be appreciated without full knowledge of the larger work; and leaving it out may reflect Mr. Buck's essential good taste, since it would hardly do to mutilate the *Gita* with editing or "simplification." In any case it is not there and, as a manual deserving lifetime study, may be read in one or another easily available edition. In the opening words of the edition we prefer and often quote a rendition by the Irish-American theosophist, William Q. Judge—there is this account of the war between the branches of a great family or tribe of ancient India:

The hostile armies, then, who meet on the plain of the Kurus are . . . two collections of the human faculties and powers, those on one side tending to drag us down, those on the other aspiring towards spiritual illumination. The battle refers not only to the great warfare that mankind as a whole carries on, but also to the struggle which is inevitable as soon as

any one unit in the human family resolves to allow his higher nature to govern him in his life.

The introduction to Buck's rendition of the *Mahabharata*, by B. A. van Nooten, a professor of Sanskrit at the University of California (Berkeley), strikes the same note:

. . . the composer of the *Mahabharata* has portrayed the action of the warriors in both a heroic and a moral context, and it should be understood as a re-enactment of a cosmic moral confrontation, not simply as an account of a battle. Unlike our Western historical philosophy, which looks for external causes—such as famine, population pressure, drought—to explain the phenomena of war and conquest, the epic bard views the events of the war as prompted by observances and violations of the laws of morality. The basic principle of cosmic or individual existence is dharma. It is the doctrine of the religious and ethical rights and duties of each individual, and refers generally to duty ordained by religion, but may also mean simply virtue, or right conduct. Every human being is expected to live according to his dharma. Violation of dharma results in disaster.

Another passage from Prof. van Nooten's introduction speaks of the religio-philosophical background of Indian belief, which is of interest in showing the ideas which exert an all-pervasive influence on the leading characters of the *Mahabharata*, and to some extent have shaped and still affect the thinking of the entire East. Readers who remember the early pages of Erik Erikson's *Gandhi's Truth* will at once recognize the importance of this understanding of Indian religious philosophy:

The Hindu system of eschatology is often expounded in the *Mahabharata*. In brief, it is the doctrine of the cycle of rebirths (*samsara*), the doctrine of the moral law (*dharma*), which is more powerful than even the gods. The moral law sustains and favors those creatures that abide by it, while thwarting those that trespass. Its instrument is *karma*, the inexorable law that spans this life and the afterdeath, working from one lifetime to another, rewarding the just and making the evil suffer. . . . The emphasis on morality in the *Mahabharata* brings with it considerations of the nature of the divine. There are many gods, the Indian pantheon is overwhelming in its diversity and vagueness. . . .

This very "vagueness," one may think, gives play to the imagination of those who have instruction in this epic from childhood on, while the mind is well nourished by the splendid imagery and heroic doings of those champions of justice and righteousness, the Pandava princes. Yet true heroes have never an easy time, and the misfortunes and ordeals of Arjuna and his brothers reveal the endless vicissitudes of human life, with all its twistings and turnings. The reader is allowed no plausible theological simplification of human existence by the *Mahabharata*. While there is a happy ending, new mysteries are compounded all along the way. Yet there are threads of symbolism which unify throughout the work, and majestic themes tower behind the foible and light-heartedness which sometimes seem to strike an irreverent if not a profane note. The total effect is of a growing appreciation of the wonder of existence. Prof. van Nooten speaks of this in remarking that William Buck was able "to capture the blend of religion and martial spirit that pervades the original epic." He feels that Buck's rendition succeeds in showing "how seemingly grand and magnificent human endeavors turn out to be astoundingly insignificant in the perspective of eternity."

What has this to do with children and education? The formation of culture through epic literature, filled with the symbolism by means of which the mind becomes energetic and the feelings refined, is of the essence of all educational undertakings. Civilizations are born from the practice of the art of mythopoeisis; what would Greece have been without Homer, or England without Shakespeare? All human excellence is fed by sap from these roots, and gains its finishing touches from lives lived in fulfillment of heroic inspiration.

FRONTIERS

Symptoms and Causes

TWO sorts of problems confront the modern world: Physical problems and human problems. Since both sorts of problems now seem to be multiplying in geometrical progression, and since finding fault and fixing blame are prevailing human reactions, not enough attention is given to the astonishing number of solution-seekers whose intelligence, persistence, and common sense are too often hidden from view by the dramatic coloring of continuous charges and complaints. This is perhaps natural. If what is wrong with the world and modern society is something very basic—having to do with fundamental conceptions of identity, nature, and human purpose—then even practical and good solutions for particular ills are bound to appear inadequate from some other point of view.

On the other hand, it is doubtless true that most people are not *ready* to consider a far-reaching right-about-face in their thinking and behavior. They may reach this point; some few have already done so; but experience shows that entire populations alter in outlook very slowly, and only after a series of crises and emergencies make it plain that there is nothing else left to do. Precisely for this reason, then, the work of intelligent change-makers has crucial importance, whatever its apparent limitations. The spread of comprehension of what is really wrong is a slow process, and since understanding is *individual*, it must take place at the micro-level, through a vast educational process made effective by the voluntary labors of a tireless, determined, and comparatively unorganized minority of individuals, each of whom works in his own way according to his own engrossing interests and concerns.

One reason the attack on symptoms fails is that the circumstances which produce the symptoms change, while the human beings who have been taught to concentrate on symptoms

change their views reluctantly. They thought they knew.

A case in point is the radical movement, in America and elsewhere. Writing on "The Crisis of the Left" in the March *Progressive*, Sidney Lens begins by declaring: "Radicalism in America is not credible." Its unbelievability is evident, he adds, "from the disarray within its own ranks." His chief point is that the Left "never graduated from single-issue protest to the recognition that something was wrong at the core of society." He has his proposal for more synthesized understanding of socio-economic problems, but here a brief look at what some thoughtful radicals are now doing seems of greater value. One group is publishing *Working Papers for a New Society* (123 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138, \$8.00 a year), a quarterly staffed by people like Noam Chomsky, Richard Barnet, and Robert Heilbroner. The focus is on the symptoms which are now becoming visible. In the Summer 1973 issue Jane Mansbridge reports on her study of the town meetings of a village in Vermont. She develops the same sort of sagacity concerning social vision, government, and people that the *Federalist Papers* display at another level. The goal, in such a discussion, is to see how social principles can work in concrete situations, and while the principles are made plain, ideological slogans and assumptions are carefully avoided. This writer's observations concern the possibilities and limitations of the direct democracy of a town meeting. In general, you get the impression from the contents of *Working Papers* that the contributors are seeking to understand social issues at their roots in peoples' lives. After reading their work on a particular subject, you have the sense of being intelligently and usefully informed, and more capable of reaching valid conclusions.

Throughout there is the quality of sober reevaluation of popular claims and doctrines. The moral sensibility and purposes of the writers are not reduced, but made strong, by this quality.

Geoffrey Faux tells the story of land acquisition in the United States, and of what private exploitation of land did to the country—"the sad pattern of speculation, corruption, and monopoly." In many cases land transfers were effected by misuse of legislation intended to serve the general welfare. The great step this writer envisions for the correction of so many ills is the return of the land to public ownership, but not to a bureaucratic central government—rather to the charge of "institutions controlled by a local community of local citizens or small producers, but which act as independent (although hopefully cooperating) economic units."

Peter Barnes, who played a part in organizing the National Land Conference in San Francisco last year, focuses on land abuse in California, showing the "feudal" arrangements which still prevail. Noting the accelerating decline of the small farm—in 1950 there were 137,000 farms in California, but by 1969 only 77,875, a drop of 44 per cent—he points to the increase of rural poverty and urban crowding of the jobless which results. He, too, looks to legislative reforms, and has a plan for carrying them out, but believes that they could not be made to work without meeting at the same time the "immediate desperate need to improve the management capabilities of community and cooperatively owned enterprises, and to increase the readiness of low-income families to participate meaningfully in such undertakings." One agency that would serve both reform and this necessary education is the land trust, the institution described by Robert Swann and others in *The Community Land Trust* (International Independence Institute, Box 183, Ashby, Mass. 01431).