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THE POWER OF MIND

THE most extraordinary thing about Simone Weil was her unbounded confidence in her own mind—or, we might better say, in *mind.* Deity she understood to be "what there is of the infallible in myself." In pure essence, thought is infallible, she maintained. Simone Petrement, her biographer, quotes Simone Weil as saying:

> A perfect thought is an independent thought and nothing else. Now thought is independent. I know this, whatever I might know of my own shortcomings. . . . In fact I deceive myself, but by rights I should never deceive myself in the sense that it is up to me not to deceive myself.

There is something about Simone Weil's book, *The Need for Roots,* that will never be dated, but will remain as fresh as the day it was written. It is a book about the needs and priorities of a good society for human beings, made up almost entirely of independent thinking. One doesn't think of the book as "infallible," but simply revels in its moral clarity, its uninhibited affirmation, and the kind of criticism of which Simone Weil is capable. Hers is consistently good and sometimes great writing. Why?

The question is perilous yet ought not to be evaded. She is great because she is thinking independently with great intensity. How was she able to do this? It was her lifelong habit to do so, and she became adept in the art. This is the quality which makes books great, which gives them a comparative immortality. It occurs in the work of men of every sort, and in a particularly interesting way in the writings of scientists. Most commonly, it is when they let their specialty go or leave it behind that their writing becomes vital. For example, the late Loren Eiseley, no matter how good an anthropologist he was, will not be remembered for his scientific contributions. He will be remembered and read, in years to come, for his philosophical musings, his sagacious asides. He knew how to use an image or a metaphor to generate a rich sense of meaning—more meaning by far than is attainable by precise scientific definition.

The impact of such thinkers carries much further than "speculation." One might echo their ideas as speculations, but in their original expression their power is much greater than any speculative exploration. We make bold to say that this power is the ring of truth. Simone Weil felt it in herself when she thought well, and from this feeling she constructed her own independent philosophy of mind.

We had *better* have some confidence in mind, since it is our only real means of knowing. Writers without this confidence are hardly worth reading. They are unable to believe in themselves, so how could they say anything worth saying? A man with justified confidence in his mind is not embarrassed to make positive affirmations. Why shouldn't he largely affirm ideas he lives by? He doesn't preface his thinking with phrases like "This is my bias," but simply says what he thinks. No dogmatism need be involved. Dogmatism is a device of insecurity. A dogma, theologically speaking, is something you are required to believe, on the claim that it is impossible for you to find it out for yourself. No independent thinker will be dogmatic, although his conviction may make him emphatic. Indeed, there are minds so at home in the world of ideas that they affirm their thought with the same splendid certainty as that, on a bright morning, is felt by a child or a poet when he declares for all to hear that *the sun is in the sky!*

The aphorisms of the wise have this quality. The wise deal with truth as familiarly as we report on the reality of the sun and the stars. Yet sometimes what a wise man says needs brooding reflection to get at its kernel. He speaks in

emblems—collections of related symbols—and one must interpret the symbols and then relate them to obtain his full meaning. One rich emblem of this sort might supply material for a whole book and not exhaust its possibilities.

Consider a paragraph from Lao tse, in the section titled "Paradoxes" in the *Tao Te Ching* (Giles translation):

> When the Great Tao falls into disuse, benevolence and righteousness come into vogue. When shrewdness and sagacity appear, great hypocrisy prevails. It is when the bonds of kinship are out of joint that filial piety and paternal affection begin. It is when the State is in a ferment of revolution that loyal patriots arise.

A better book than Machiavelli's *Psince* could be developed from this passage. What does Lao tse mean? He makes a sage comment on the typical human response to conscious and unconscious inauthenticity, one could say—but how feeble this reading when compared to the text!

Wisdom is direct awareness of the way things are, recognizable only by some parallel reality in ourselves. Among philosophical writers, the best ones are those who give encouragement to others to locate and use the wisdom in themselves. This was the Socratic enterprise, practiced remarkably well, in our own time, by Ortega y Gasset. Everything Ortega wrote was in some sense dialogue. He was able to stir others to do independent thinking.

Another man with a rare confidence in the power of thought was Henri Bergson. Reading Bergson—now a somewhat neglected thinker—is healthful for the mind. While his content is difficult, he writes lucidly, easily engaging the attention of the reader. Early in his collection of essays, *The Creative Mind* (Greenwood Press, 1968), he tells what he understands the work of philosophy to be. It is to learn more about the inner life of human beings, and Bergson suspects that most philosophy deals only with its outer shell. "Had not the novelist and moralist advanced farther in that direction than the philosopher?" he asks.

This question becomes an entry to study of the obstacles to self-knowledge:

> But if it is a province of literature to undertake in this way the study of the soul in the concrete, upon individual examples, the duty of philosophy it seemed to me was to lay down the general conditions of the direct, immediate observation of oneself by oneself. This inner observation is warped by habits we have developed; the chief example of this warping is doubtless the one which created the problem of liberty—a pseudo-problem born of a confusion of duration with extension. But there are other pseudo-problems which seemed to have the same origin: our moods appear to us as though they could be separated, counted so to speak; certain of them, thus dissociated, have as it were an intensity which is measurable; for each and every one of these states we think we can substitute the words which designate them and which ever after will cover them up; then we attribute to them the fixity, the discontinuity, of the words themselves.
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> It is this covering that we must grasp in order to tear it off.

Bergson means that for thinking about the soul, about man's inner life, we must free ourselves of the habits of thinking we have developed for dealing with the external world. This, after all, is scientific thinking. Scientific thinking is thinking about *matter*. By this activity, or any practical thinking about externalities, the mind tends to take on the qualities of the material world. The qualities of the internal world are *different,* unsuited to the patterns of inquiry appropriate for finding out about matter. This was the reason, Bergson suggests, that Kant declared it impossible for us to know the thing-in-itself, the reality behind the veil of sense impressions. Bergson, however, thinks we can know the thing in itself, by learning to think in the appropriate way.

Bergson is quite contemporary in his account of the way science works:

> Positive science, as a matter of fact, goes to sensible observation to obtain materials whose

elaboration it entrusts to the faculty of abstracting and generalizing, to judgment and reasoning, to the intelligence. Having started from pure mathematics, it continued through mechanics, then through physics and chemistry; it arrived somewhat late in the day at biology. Its original domain, which has continued to be its preferred domain, is that of inert matter. It is less at its ease in the organized world, where it treads its way with an assured step only if it relies upon physics and chemistry; it clings to the physico-chemical in vital phenomena rather than to what is really vital in the living. But great is its embarrassment when it reaches the mind. That does not mean that it cannot obtain some knowledge of it; but this knowledge becomes all the more vague the farther it gets away from the common border-line between mind and matter. One will never advance on this new terrain as on the old, relying solely on the power of logic. . . .

Our intelligence is the prolongation of our senses. Before we speculate we must live, and life demands that we make use of matter, either with our organs, which are natural tools, or with tools, properly so-called, which are artificial organs. Long before there was a philosophy and a science, the role of intelligence was already that of manufacturing instruments and guiding the action of our body on surrounding bodies. Science has pushed this labor of the intelligence much further, but has not changed its direction. It aims above all at making us masters of matter. Even when science is speculating, it is still devoting its attention to acting, the value of scientific theories being gauged constantly by the solidity of the grip they give us on reality.

As long as the achievements of science are measured in this way, no criticism is in order. But meanwhile the intellect has been shaped by the scientific activity, so that when we philosophize with that same intellect we attempt to make spirit submit to the definitions of matter. This does not work, while all our intellectual past opposes effective inner inquiry:

Everyone can have noticed that it is more difficult to make progress in the knowledge of oneself than in the knowledge of the external world. Outside oneself, the effort to learn is natural; one makes it with increasing facility; one applies rules. Within, attention must remain tense and progress becomes more and more painful; it is as though one were going against the natural bent. Is there not something surprising in this? We are internal to ourselves, and our personality is what we should know best.

Yet such is not the case; our mind is as it were in a strange land, whereas matter is familiar to it and in it the mind is at home.

Now comes what seems a crucial observation:

"But that is because a certain ignorance of self is perhaps useful to a being which must exteriorize itself in order to act; it answers a necessity of life."

Bergson's assumption is plain: Man is essentially a spiritual being, now involved in the world of matter. His habits have become adjusted to materiality—with some degree of necessity, so that he may become able to act here—but for this facility of action in matter he pays a price of ignorance of the self.

What then does Bergson propose? Fundamentally, the mind must deliberately free itself of the modifications imposed on thinking by the qualities of material experience:

Our action is exerted on matter, and the farther the knowledge of matter has been pursued the more efficacious is the action. It is doubtless to one's advantage, if one is to act effectively, to think of what one will do, to understand what one has done, to have a clear conception of what one might have done: nature invites us to do so; it is one of the traits which distinguish man from the animal, completely intent as it is on the impression of the moment. But nature asks of us only a quick glance at ourselves; we then perceive the mind, but the mind preparing to shape matter, already adapting itself to it, assuming something of the spatial, the geometric, the intellectual. A knowledge of the mind, in so far as it is properly spiritual, would rather keep us from that end. We draw nearer to it, on the contrary, when we study the structure of things. Thus nature turns mind away from mind, turns mind toward matter. But in that way we see how we can, if we like, indefinitely widen, deepen, and intensify the vision of the mind which has been granted us. Since the insufficiency of this vision is due in the first place to the fact that it is directed upon the mind already "spatialized" and divided into mental compartments where matter can be inserted, let us separate the mind from the space in

> which it is so at home, from the materiality which it takes to itself in order to rest upon matter. In so doing we shall restore it to itself and be able to comprehend it immediately. This direct vision of the mind by the mind is the chief function of intuition as I understand it.

Mind, for Bergson, quite evidently has psychological objectivity. Its stuff and modes of operation are visible to him. And when he speaks of intuition, he means the kind of perception of which the mind becomes capable when it is enabled to look past the separations and definitions through which the external world becomes known to us. It does not do to label Bergson the "philosopher of intuition" and then to suppose that he is somehow understood. One does not understand Bergson until one has achieved some kind of parallel to his realization.

When Bergson speaks of clearing the foreground of the mind to allow intuition direct play, he puts into his own words an independent discovery of something which was known long before to such master psychologists as Patanjali, and spoken of by Krishna to Arjuna in the sixth discourse of the *Bhagavad-Gita.* Yet this recognition or identification is not "knowledge." The classification of ideas and philosophical schools becomes the enemy of philosophy because it seems to eliminate the need to go behind the outer shell of forms of thought to the authentic inner experience which later was inadequately described in words. The patterns of thought are but the intellectual rind, transmitting only outlines to those who fail to go deeper into themselves to the core of meanings.

This was Ortega's reason for emphasizing the importance of history, since by history he meant establishing a vital, experiential knowledge of how the past lives in the present. He said in *Concord and History:*

> . . . it is dear that no real situation has ever consisted of such patterns only. Life is concrete, and so are circumstances. Only after having reconstructed the concrete situation and the function of the idea in it can we hope for a true understanding of the idea. But when we take the idea in its abstract sense, which in principle it always holds out to us, the idea will be a dead idea, a mummy, and its content that vague suggestion of human form peculiar to a mummy. . . . A "history of ideas"—philosophical, mathematical, political, religious, economic—in the traditional sense is impossible. Those ideas, I repeat, which are but abstractions of ideas, have no history.
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> To sum up: History must abolish the dehumanized form in which it has offered us the philosophical doctrines. It must incorporate them again in the dynamic interplay of a man's life and let us witness their teleological functioning in it. What if all the inert and mummified ideas which the customary history of philosophy has presented to us arose and functioned again, resuming the part they played in the existence of those who wrestled with them? Would not all those patterns of thought light up with a universal *evidence* to gratify us, their historians who revived them, as they gratified the original thinkers and students around them?

Bergson was well aware that the reality of the intuitive side of human awareness is ill-defended by logic or argument. Agreement depends not upon some skillful form of persuasion, but upon the development of corresponding insight. The subtle excellences of an art are not likely to be recognized save by the already excellent among artists. Intuitive insight can be judged by reason only by reviewing its consequences; the substance is prior to and independent of the reasoning process.

Yet intuitions supply material for a kind of thought—for the exercise of reason at its own level—according to Bergson. He calls this level Metaphysics, which needs its own language and laws. Thinking, here, he says, will begin by eliminating the concepts formed from experience of matter. It will rely on experience—the sort of *thinking* experience Bergson has himself gone through and given some account of—and thus evolve concepts based on the inner life. This sort of thinking, Bergson says, unites the general with the particular—the latter being the evidence discerned by the individual thinker. For illustration he chooses an ancient as well as present question—the immortality of the soul:

> Suppose we take a problem which we shall state in the terms of the traditional metaphysics: does the soul survive the body? It is easy to decide it once and for all by reasoning on pure concepts. We shall, then, define the soul and say with Plato that it is one and simple. We shall conclude that it cannot be dissolved. Therefore, it is immortal. Nothing could be clearer. But the conclusion holds good only if we accept the definition, that is, the construction. It is subordinated to this hypothesis; it is hypothetical. But suppose we give up constructing the idea of the soul as one constructs the idea of a triangle; let us look at the facts. If, as we believe, experience proves that only a minute part of conscious life is conditioned by the brain, it will follow that the suppression of the brain will probably leave conscious life subsisting. At least the burden of proof will rest now with him who denies the survival much more than with him who affirms it. It will only be a question of the degree of added life, I admit; we shall have to have other reasons, drawn this time from religion, to arrive at a higher form of precision and attribute to this life an endless duration. But, even from the philosophical point of view, there will no longer be any *if*: we shall affirm categorically—I mean without subordination to a metaphysical hypothesis—what we affirm, were we only to affirm it as being probable. The first thesis has the beauty of the definitive, but it was suspended in thin air, in the region of the simple possible. The other is unfinished, but it pushes strong roots down into the real.

What force has this statement? Very little, no doubt, for those who have given no attention to the meanings implicit in metaphysical necessity. But as Bergson shows, such a conclusion may be seen as natural, once we get acquainted with our own minds as independent intelligences. To look at mind or soul with our minds in their present condition, and then to generalize, he says, invites us "to imagine mind on the model of matter," when other means are required. Figure and metaphor, he suggests, have greater precision than abstraction in such inquiries.

When it comes to self-knowledge, and we set out to pursue it seriously, we find that the entire question of evidence and the means to certainty must come under critical review. Bergson was for the Western world something of a pioneer in this review. Only now is it becoming possible for many others to see the relevance and importance of his example.

REVIEW
ON FOLLOWING NATURE

NOT long ago, a young woman living in the Los Angeles area found herself suffering from chronic sore throat. Years before an accidental knife wound had penetrated her collar bone, with treatment, according to the report, by radiation, possibly to counteract infection. Since she obtained no relief for her sore throat, her doctor sent her to a specialist who, in turn, suggested that she see a surgeon. The surgeon told her that her thyroid gland was probably cancerous and should be removed. The young woman found this upsetting and delayed decision. Meanwhile, on a plane trip, she met an environmental physician who counseled her to "see an internist." Turning to the yellow pages, she looked up "Internists" and picked one to talk to. After examining her, and listening to what she said, the doctor proposed the possibility that her enlarged thyroid was perfectly natural, in view of her exposure to radiation. He suggested that it may have grown large from active self-defense against the effects of the radiation—a normal reaction. "There may be nothing really wrong with your thyroid," he said. "We'll have to see." And he added: "I'm an internist, and I like to leave things the way they are. Surgeons usually like to cut them out."

No matter who was right in this case—the internist or the surgeon—the issue is clear. When do you leave things the way they are, and when do you make an intervening effort to change them—presumably for the better?

Most people go by their hunches in deciding such questions. If you like people who are sure of what they think, and have great trust in scientific knowledge, you may choose the surgeon for authority. Or if, on the other hand, you have read about the large number of unnecessary surgical operations performed every year, and tend toward the "nature knows best" point of view, the internist may have your vote. (In the case of tumors there are of course ways to determine whether they are malignant or benign; here we are considering broad human tendencies and cultural attitudes.)

The encounter of the woman with a sore throat with the two doctors—a surgeon and an internist—was personal experience, yet still an instance or type of the encounter we all have with present changing opinions about nature. Should we simply learn from nature, or try to improve on her? Fearing, now, that many of our "improvements" have been terrible mistakes, we doubt that we know enough to decide. In the past we have many times altered natural processes in order to help ourselves, with no attention at all to nature as an independent organism, with the result that watercourses have been poisoned and the air made unfit to breathe. For a great many reasons, then, we may think it best to leave things the way they are.

Of course, simply ploughing a field is intervention of a sort, but this only turns the question into inquiry about good and bad places to plough. The real question remains: How do you learn from nature? Do you follow the example of Goethe and Thoreau, and "look inward to see the cosmos," or should you take science as your guide?

What men have thought, over some three hundred years, about the answers to this question is the subject-matter of *Nature's Economy* by Donald Worster, recently published by the Sierra Club ($15). We have already taken brief note of this volume, but it is one to return to again and again. Mr. Worster has written a study of not only the advancing science of ecology, but of the moral and philosophical thinking out of which the modern ecological movement grew. He has a remarkable grasp of a vast literature and provides reassuring balance between impartial thinking and his own evident conviction. His thorough knowledge of the field and his careful comparisons of conflicting opinion give the reader confidence in what he says.

There is for example this account of the development and quality of scientific detachment:

> The ruling temper of this objectivity has been tersely summed up by the modern historian Charles Gillispie: "Science is about nature. It is about things"—and things include only what can be analyzed, measured, and numbered. Asserting that knowledge obtained through sympathetic intuition is idiosyncratic and unverifiable, scientists tended to excise from their sphere of inquiry any hypothesis about nature that bore the taint of personal vision. Such romantic introspection must be subjective, and subjectivism was no longer considered reliable or respectable. The principle of objectivity demanded a cosmos stripped clean of all the emotional and spiritual qualities men and women theretofore had found in the natural world. This demand could only have followed an implicit moral decision on the part of modern science. In effect, the mainstream of scientists refused to accept the Goethean notion of correspondence or its ethic of knowledge. They could see no promise in the doctrine because they were unsure what the Romantics meant by inner spirit, whether it existed in fact, and how spirit might be related to matter. Rather than waste time trying to find out, they tacitly decided to limit "positive knowledge" to a realm in which they had more confidence, the cool hard world of material substance as defined by mathematics. That world was not to be studied through love or sympathy—indeed, could not be, for it was widely subscribed to by scientists that nature had to be cleansed of sentiment and so deliberately made unappealing to human feelings. Such had been the Baconian mission from the first. The quest for objectivity also meant that the outer physical world was to be kept firmly separated from all religious experience. Science was laying claim to nature, warning the pious to go elsewhere for their inspiration. As Gillispie, himself an ardent apologist for this devaluation of nature, makes clear, the ideal of scientific objectivity involved at least by indirection an ethic and a theology: it was based on the belief that nature is not God, hence not worthy of man's piety. Even sympathetic response became suspect.

Mr. Worster's book gives a musing account of the deep reaction to this tough-minded stance. He shows how such attitudes pervade not only scientific inquiry, but are also at the foundation of the economic organization and enterprise of the modern world. Science studies nature in terms of "things," and economics takes charge of, produces, and markets things. We can do what we please with things (nature) if we know how—no built-in morality is involved. Today, many of the ecologists and more emphatically the environmentalists are questioning this entire outlook—"challenging the larger set of values associated with the long rise of bourgeois civilization—the world view of the aspiring middle class, with its dedication to technology, unlimited production and consumption, self-advancement, individualism, and the domination of nature." Mr. Worster comments:

> If the overthrow of bourgeois civilization is the historical import of the contemporary ecology movement, it is ironic to find the movement's strongest appeal among the Anglo-American middle class. This has been well noted, with not a little indignation, by the would-be middle classes of the world. Many have asked: Is the message of ecology a sermon on the virtues of poverty, to be heeded only by those who are still have-nots? Can middle-class environmentalists bring off a revolution against their own economic self-interest, or do they in reality mean to enact liberal, pragmatic reforms that will leave the base of the bourgeois culture intact? Is it possible at all, two hundred years after Watts' steam engine, to abandon the Industrial Revolution, or has the chain of events bound us to a self-propelled technology? What would an alternative social order founded on the science of ecology look like—and would the middle class really accept such a world? Perhaps more significantly, would the billions of people living today in relative or absolute scarcity want to live there?
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> These are the still-evolving issues of our time, and their outcome may not be known for decades, even centuries.

Mr. Worster hopes that his book will help to resolve these issues by bringing their foundations and implications into the foreground of present-day awareness. As he says:

> We must know all we can about how ecology has shaped man's perception of nature, and what its practical effects have been. We will need, too, a fuller understanding of what science is and how much we have come to depend on it for guidance. What we must decide, in short, is whether ecology—and science generally—is the tutor we want for the years ahead.

This is a book that needs to be read along with Erik Eckholm's *Losing Ground* and Lappé and Collins' *Food First.* The question of whether the bourgeois culture can be preserved "intact" may be answered much sooner than we think by the emerging realities reported in these two books, yet Mr. Worster's investigation places such works in a context of the history of intellectual development, throwing more light on how general education concerning these issues ought to proceed.

Philosophic themes pervade *Nature's Economy.* The thinking of Thoreau has an important place, likewise the work of Joseph Wood Krutch and Aldo Leopold. The author tells how these well-known conservationist writers evolved their ideas, how their thinking changed, and shows the far-reaching effects of their influence. His objective is to "unite a moral sensibility with the testimony of science." Yet the difficulty of deciding how to learn from nature remains. As Mr. Worster puts it toward the end of the book:

> If nature is found to be a world of interdependence, then man is obliged to consider that characteristic a moral dictum. . . . A serious flaw in this argument, of course, is that different men have found different paths. . . . The source of much frustration in the search for absolutes is that nature is, above all, protean—far more so than most moral naturalists have been willing to understand. "First follow nature," the sage said. But which road do you take? Whose map do you use? And how can you keep from falling into the ditch?

Happily, today we have some very good books on the roads taken in the past, and what they have led to, and on the roads we might have taken. We are not without guidance.

COMMENTARY
THE UTILITY OF IGNORANCE

BERGSON'S suggestion (p. 2) that "a certain ignorance of self is perhaps useful to a being which must exteriorize itself in order to act" has numerous parallels. Knowledge, in short, creates ignorance. We are obliged to accept this ignorance, Bergson says, because "it answers a necessity of life."

Considering the facts of telepathy and clairvoyance, Prof. H. H. Price, of Oxford, once proposed (in *Philosophy*, October, 1940) a similar analysis. It may be a mistake, he argued, to ask why Telepathy occurs at all.

> Perhaps the right question to ask, anyhow at the beginning, is not "Why does Telepathy occur sometimes?" but rather "Why doesn't it occur all the time?" (Compare M. Bergson's discussion of Memory). According to him, it is forgetting, rather than remembering, which needs a causal explanation; and the problem is "Why do we remember so little?" rather than "Why do we remember at all?" If we approach the matter in this way, there is one biological point which strikes us at once. *Too much* Telepathy would be paralysing to action. It would distract us from the immediate practical problems which we have to solve if we are to survive in this world.

Prof. Price makes the same proposal regarding Clairvoyance:

> Ought we perhaps to assume that Clairvoyance is our normal state, and that ordinary perception is something subnormal, a kind of myopia? . . . Ought we to have expected that by rights, so to speak, every mind would be aware of everything, or, at any rate, of the indefinitely wide range of things? The puzzle would then be to explain why the ordinary human mind is in fact aware of so little. We might then conjecture that our sense organs and afferent nerves (which, of course, are connected with our organs of action, i.e., with the muscular system) are arranged to prevent us from attending to more than a bit of the material world—that bit which is biologically relevant to us as animal organisms. . . . In that case, what prevents us from being clairvoyant all the time is—in M. Bergson's phrase—*l'attention à la vie.* If so we should expect that habitual clairvoyance would be physiologically or psycho-physically "abnormal" or "unbalanced"; or at any rate that their "balance"—I have to speak in metaphors again—would be more easily upset than other peoples.

Or, to put it another way, only the most balanced people can *afford* to be clairvoyant.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
A HEROIC MINORITY?

THE second issue of John Holt's paper, *Growing Without Schooling*, is rich in material for parents who are wondering about the possibility of teaching their children at home. There are various questions. First is the issue of competence: What do they need to know? Holt is mainly encouraging to parents on this point. They know more than they think they do, he says.

Then there is the problem of what the law says about parents teaching children at home. The legislation varies from state to state. Holt suggests that a parent who goes to the public library and then to a law library and looks up the statutes in his own state may be better qualified than a lawyer after doing such research. There is one drawback to this approach: Accurate knowledge of what the statutes say does not tell you anything about which laws the state authorities enforce and the ones they have decided to ignore (giving less trouble than trying to repeal them). Even so, knowing the laws is a good start in preparing oneself to deal with the authorities.

One parent-contributor to *Growth Without Schooling* writes a long and informative letter on what he has done—describing the correspondence courses he has used with his children and telling how he copes with the compulsory education laws. He says:

> I've learned a lot about "legal research" just from doing it, and I want to share what I know.
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> First, let me hasten to point out that everything you folks want to know about the various state laws, court cases, etc. is contained in the study put out by the Massachusetts Center for Public Interest Law—*The Final Report: Legal Implications of Compulsory Education*, National Institute of Education, Project No. NEG-00-3-0061, by Wm. Aikman and Lawrence Kotin (sponsored by HEW). Available from the Massachusetts Center for Public Interest Law, 2 Park St., Boston, MA 02116, $10.75. You may also be able to get this report, perhaps free, from the National Institute of Education, HEW, 1200 19th, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.
>
> The only thing this book doesn't give you is the exact text of each of the state laws. It does, however, refer you to the specific title, section, etc., so that you could easily get this for yourself.
>
> I would suggest that it's more educational and satisfying to go to the local library and look up the laws for yourself than to ask your state legislator (who will have to do just that, as he certainly will not be familiar with them).

Being very much interested in the right of parents to teach their own children, Mr. Holt took this advice and visited the main Boston library:

> I found the Massachusetts education laws scary reading, much more tightly drawn, threatening, and punitive than I had expected. One would suppose that they dealt with dangerous criminals rather than children. Of course, they were written around the turn of the century, and so, written by rich Yankees and aimed *at* the children of (probably mostly Irish) immigrants. I had hoped to find that the School Boards and Superintendents had been given the task of running schools, but that the task of enforcing school attendance had been left to other agencies. Not so; in this matter, the schools *are* the police. They can demand information about the children, and people have to answer. If they refuse, or give wrong answers, they can be fined. Nothing in the wording of these laws encourages the idea that the state looks kindly on children and wants to help them. On the contrary, the impression is that the state considers unattended children a danger, and wants them all safely locked up. . . .
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> Whatever in practice the laws may mean, ordinary people can at least find out what they *say*, and they should find out.
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> However, I still think it is useful and probably important for people to write their state legislators on this subject. The lawmakers ought to know that some citizens are concerned about this. We in turn need to know which if any lawmakers are sympathetic to unschooling, and which strongly oppose it. We need to begin to make legislative allies. For in the long or maybe not so long run, unschooling will be a political matter.

Elsewhere, Mr. Holt explains his use of terms:

> *GWS* will say "unschooling" when we mean taking children out of school, and "deschooling" when we mean changing the laws to make schools non-compulsory and to take away from them their power to grade, rank, and label people, i.e., to make lasting, official, public judgments about them.

Why, one may wonder, all this attention to an issue or right in which hardly more than one per cent of the population is interested? Well, the issue is very close to being the same as freedom of religion. As long as expressions such as "public opinion," "popular prejudice," and "majority outlook" have some meaning, there will be orthodoxies in the ordering of society, and various means of securing conformity to orthodox opinion. Rule according to certain conventions has certain obvious advantages—you know what the other fellow is likely to do on the road, and he knows what you will do. So you both observe the traffic laws, more or less, gaining time and avoiding accidents as a result. Sensible conventions in physical behavior make a lot of sense. The practical side of our affairs is well conducted through conformity to them.

Where, then, does freedom *not* to conform become important? Where what is true and right is not the substance of what we are doing, but its goal. The conventions governing a public meeting to obtain general knowledge of what people think are not meant to make people think in the same way, but to enable their differences to become explicit and commonly understood. By such means democracy usefully combines convention with freedom.

Good institutions evolve as the result of this kind of intelligence: Conformity where it is useful, freedom wherever it is vital. Well, where *is* freedom vital? In religion, we say, and everybody, or almost everybody, agrees.

Isn't freedom vital in education, too? What people *say* in answer to this question may vary far less than what they really think varies. A school administrator usually worries a great deal more about securing efficient conformity than about the awakening of minds. The bigger the school, the greater his problems and the more urgent the need for conformity. The conformity we practice on the road is *in order* to be free, and the administrator will probably claim the same virtue—children have to be ordered and controlled before they are able to learn, he is likely to say. But from what John Holt says—and what various others report about public school practice around the country—the conformity reaches far up into the region that ought to be free.

It takes genuine moral intelligence to make reasonable conformity serve as portal to free development, and moral intelligence is far too mobile for bureaucratic expression. So, when bureaucracy takes over in education, freedom tends to go. It gets in the way of the system. Then public education becomes little more than what John Stuart Mill called it over a century ago—"a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind."

Obviously, majority rule in material matters is efficiency and common sense, but majority rule in matters of thought, opinion, and truth is psychological and moral tyranny. The unhappy fact, here, is that a great many people do not seem to mind being subjected to this sort of tyranny. Such people tend to regard parents who want to teach their own children as "some kind of nut." Our schools are fine, they often say. But the schools *can't* be fine unless they reject the tendency that Mill speaks of—to cast all the young in the same mould. Recognizing this is the first step in grasping the issues in public education.

The parents Holt speaks for and champions in *Growing Without Schooling* are a handful of people who insist that the schools moderate their

claims to "authority." This will happen, of course, if they lose their power to control all children through compulsory school attendance. Parents who contend for the right to teach their own children are demonstrating in practice that institutions are only practical conveniences, not authorities on what is "truth." This is why the one per cent of the population who care about teaching children at home make an important and perhaps heroic minority. They are doing what they can to reduce the loss of individuality to institutional control and administrative necessity.

A subscription to John Holt's *Growing Without Schooling* is $10 for six issues. Write Holt Associates, Inc., 308 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02116.

FRONTIERS

Quiet Renaissance

A FEW weeks ago we quoted a report on the "quiet revolution" going on all over the world—telling about the gradual revival of self-reliance in near and far-off places, rural and urban. Slowly developing, it was said, are "new concepts of production and manufacture which could radically change the industrial system from what we know today." (Wm. Ellis in *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists,* November, 1977.)

Some illustration of the tangible reality behind this general statement is afforded by the July-August (1977) *Asian Action,* newsletter of the Asian Cultural Forum on Development. (Single copies, $2, annual subscription $12, from ACFOD (Room 201, 399/I, Soi Siri, off Silom Road, Bangkok-5, Thailand.) This issue, entirely devoted to development in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), begins with an editorial statement:

> Sri Lanka has been described as the beauty spot of the Indian Ocean. The friendly people, the tropical climate, the scenic beauty of the hills, rivers, waterfalls, the golden sands of the beaches, the fruits and flowers round the year and the famous Gems have all lured travelers and traders from all over to the shores of this island during the many centuries of her past history.
>
> This island was self-sufficient in food until the advent of the Western Empire Builders who changed the economy of the country.
>
> The message of peace and tolerance of the Buddha coupled with the desire of the monarchs and the people in the past to produce abundant supplies of food resulted in a cultural pattern that served as a driving force in Sri Lanka.
>
> The national chronicle *Mahavamsa* records in detail the efforts made by each of the monarchs who ruled the land to construct vast reservoirs and intricate systems of irrigation channels to ensure success in food production.
>
> They also spent much time, energy and wealth in the provision of great religious monuments dedicated to the observances of the Buddhist religion.
>
> Religion and agriculture blended beautifully to produce a rich cultural heritage.
>
> The village Temple was the all-important social, cultural, educational and religious Center and the incumbent monk played a great role in leadership.
>
> Self-help or "Shramadana" produced all the labour necessary for the construction and maintenance of vast irrigation works. Cultivation operations and community projects were all successfully attended to with "Shramadana."
>
> The Colonial rule destroyed the fabric of Society and the plantation economy introduced by the Imperial rulers damaged the cultural patterns. With some effort one could yet discover traces of the ancient cultural patterns in some of the remote villages. To discover these rich cultural patterns and infuse life into them is a task that needs all our attention. ACFOD believes that non-governmental organisations could be of great service in the revival of these cultural patterns.

Sri Lanka once supported a prosperous nation of twenty-seven million people who fed themselves and exported the excess rice production. Now fourteen million are dependent on external food sources. A first step in recovering from this dependency is the restoration of the ancient water storage and irrigation system for the rice paddy fields, designed and completed during a millennium which ended in the twelfth century A.D.! A brief article in *Asian Action* describes the cooperative action of two hundred villagers who are cleaning out the old tanks and strengthening their walls:

> This village, at a cost of about $300 (U.S.) will double their rice production by insuring an irrigated second crop, and add seven acres to production.
>
> But there are other gains, immeasurable in money. The village has rediscovered itself. In this day of intruding commercialism and resultant individualism, this village has achieved collective power. . . . They no longer sit back and wait for government or outsiders to make things happen; they have found their own power.

Another article describes the plan for a model energy-self-sufficient village complete with windmills, solar energy collectors, biogas units, and even solar cells to produce some electricity.

> Soon the technology used at Pattiyapola will be a mixture of simple traditional technologies and the most sophisticated modern techniques. On the one hand, there will be biogas generators developed in India and operated successfully in rural areas throughout Asia; on the other silicon cells developed for space satellites will convert solar energy directly into electricity. Manufacturing these silicon cells is well within Sri Lanka's technical competence and the basic raw material needed is sand. In the same way the principles of jet-age aerodynamics have already been incorporated into the designs of the experimental windmills on which those of Pattiyapola village will be based.

Another aspect of the changes sought in Sri Lanka is described in the opening editorial:

> The traditional craftsman has suffered a set back due to the operations of the mass-producing machine. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the great savant and connoisseur of arts and crafts, focused attention in his day on the need to save traditional craftsmen from the competition of the machine. With the expansion of commerce the traditional craftsman has found it impossible to survive. He himself had no alternative but to lend himself to other wage-earning employment. The introduction of the imported tractor, agro-chemicals and fertilizers has put the farmer in a helpless situation. The farmer is no longer the independent personality that he was. He has been caught up in an exchange control and an import control problem of expensive spare parts for tractors, and expensive imported agro-chemicals and fertilizer.

What will emancipate the peasant farmer? Only the buffalo, who once supplied the energy for cultivation and harvesting, while giving milk and curd to nourish the farmer's family.

An article comparing the multinationals as they operate in Sri Lanka with the British East India Company of the past shows that the people of Lanka are well aware that these giant concerns "transfer natural resources to the home countries and pollution to the poor countries." Little by little it is becoming obvious that Gandhi was the true planner of the welfare of not only the East but all the world.