

## VALUE OF A DIFFERENT KIND

A DAY's mail is often enough to reveal the kind of society we live in—one based on insidious persuasion. Most of what we get is intended to persuade us to do something—buy something, vote for something, and sometimes give something to causes that are apparently worthy and in need of support. The most successful people of today are the ones who become skilled in the arts of persuasion, who study human susceptibility to suggestion and learn to fit appeals to the interests and fears of their audience. Our mail, then—apart from personal communications—is likely to be of three sorts: from sales people, from the righteous, and from educators. This third class of mail will be modest in format and much less voluminous than the two others, but its object is nonetheless to persuade.

If you go out into the street, in a car or on foot, the experience is much the same. Signs are everywhere. If you use a radio, sound gives the same general impression. The listener is always some kind of target who in self-preservation must learn to be indifferent, to thicken his skin, to shield himself from the constant stimuli to act in one way or another. Again, the most successful people are those who discover new ways to claim attention, new places to put up signs, new ways of glamorizing suggestions. They all tell about things you may want to do, ought to do, and sometimes must do. Even the educators, in their zeal to get through to people, borrow the techniques of the righteous, and, if they have the funds, the mass methods of the merchandiser. They can't teach their matters of importance unless they reach enough people to make it worth while. Mostly, all these persuaders feel good about what they are doing. The merchandisers are lubricating the economy, the righteous are serving the world's needs, and the educators, are, well, "educating."

Nature, in striking contrast, is simply there. It does not try to persuade, but performs in comparative silence. It does not intrude, although on occasion it will reveal some plain necessity. It affords delight, serenity, and stormy weather. It teaches, the poets and nature-lovers say, but in a mode that requires both affection and effort from the student. A few distinguished humans succeed in giving nature a voice, but these are not ordinary persuaders. We cherish their expressions and save their words from oblivion by preserving them in books.

Another sort of contrast is provided by the newspaper. The daily fare of reporting convinces you by the remoteness and inaccessibility of its sources that there is nothing you can do. Events proceed, plans are made, wars are fought, all beyond our control. The mechanisms for individual influence have so many cogs and filters that the energy of individual action is soon lost in the process of transfer, which not only does not work, but is not really meant to work. You know yourself to be an involuntary collaborator in the status quo by participation in the processes which support it. And this participation has become part of your own life process—necessary, at least, to its continuation in an accustomed manner. The "action" in the world is carried on by large institutions, political and industrial, which move in a lumbering, indecisive fashion, yet according to laws established from custom and the habits of nearly everyone. Our external lives are shaped, their dependencies designed, by the needs and requirements of these institutions, which would soon collapse if we deserted them, but we can't see how to withdraw. The matrix of the natural environment is everywhere studded with monopolistic connections with the institutional environment, so that the means of independent access to food, clothing, and shelter hardly exist,

nor have we any longer the necessary skills. Where, in these arid hills and dried-out valleys of California, could you find water, without the pipes installed by the city fathers? And who, after all, would want to go about wearing the skins of animals? Where, indeed, are the animals?

This mournful chant could go on for pages, but all we would learn is that a natural division of labor is not entirely wrong. Some technical intelligence has a necessary place in our lives, the need being to set appropriate limits to its devices. That is what we do not know how or are unable to do. Since primitive times we have been displacing individual responsibilities with mechanisms of supply and control, making ourselves free of practical functions—becoming, finally, rather helpless organisms. Our helplessness extends up the scale to include social and economic relationships, and here management has become so complex, so unwieldy, that the machinery of their operation threatens to break down. We see this coming, but cannot see what to do. The crusted structure of institutions seems impossible to make malleable, to simplify.

Thoughtful critics are able to point out that no other result was possible, in consideration of our past behavior and decisions. And philosophers will say that the elimination of humans from our theory of the cosmos, from its functioning reality, has begun to achieve its end. The universe, we learned, came into being with no intelligence to guide it, and will proceed to its entropic finish in the same way. And as Bertrand Russell put it eighty years ago, we must accept that "all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins." All these things, he said, "if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand."

Russell might now say, were he still alive, that we have found out how to accelerate the process of disintegration. One of the means of acceleration has been the technique of doing without people in both war and industry, save for only those who have learned how to make the machinery run. Only four or five per cent of the population, we are told, now grow all the food America needs, with some for export, while the Japanese, according to recent report, "are aiming to produce the hardware and software of a computer that will be able to understand spoken languages, see and comprehend objects and make decisions based on inference, logic, and deduction." Nissan's automated plant near Tokyo, called a "showpiece" for visiting engineers, has an automated welding line where robots "handle 97 per cent of the work, which is watched over by no more than a half a dozen humans." It takes only a minute to move through the welding line, and the car is completely constructed in eighteen hours. (*Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 30, 1982.) It would not be at all difficult to imagine a time when humans will be entirely superfluous except as consumers, who would, we suppose, support themselves by taking care of each other in elaborate welfare programs.

It sounds insane. It is insane, although having so much company moving in this direction tends to hide the aberration.

Yet humans seem to have inner alarm systems, the ones with hair triggers being the endowment of artists and writers. Speaking of the artists of the 1950s, Lewis Mumford (in *In the Name of Sanity*) said:

But now all their talent, all their energy, is concentrated on only one end: a retreat, not only from the surface world of visible buildings and bodies, but a retreat from any kind of symbol that could, by its very organization, be interpreted as having a connection with organized form: a retreat into the formless, the lifeless, the disorganized, the dehumanized: the world of nonsignificance, as close as possible to nonexistence. . . .

What they say should awaken us as no fuller and saner images might. These men, these symbols have a terrible message to communicate: their visual nihilism is truer to reality than all the conventional paintings that assure us so smoothly that our familiar world is still there—and will always be there.

Let us not reproach the artist for telling us this message, which we have not the sensitivity to record or the courage to tell ourselves: the message that the future, on the terms that it presents itself to us now, has become formless, valueless, meaningless: that in this irrational age, governed by absolute violence and pathological hate, our whole civilization might vanish from the face of the earth as completely as images of any sort have vanished from those pictures: as dismayingly as that little isle in the Pacific vanished from the surface of the ocean under the explosion of the hydrogen bomb.

But Mumford, himself an artist, cannot resign himself to this fate. He calls upon the artist "to rally, by his example and effective demonstration, the forces of life, the passionate commitment of love, to recall to us all the qualities we have violated this last century in the untrammelled pursuit of power."

Our numbness is our death. Whatever our immediate fate may be, as individuals or as a nation, we must, as a condition of survival recover our humanity again: the capacity for rational conduct, free from compulsive fears and pathological hatreds: the capacity for love and confidence and cooperation, for humorous self-criticism and disarming humility, in our dealings with each other, and in our dealings with the rest of the human race, including, it goes without saying, our enemies. Even should we meet disaster or death through the attempt to replace the politics of dehumanized and absolute power by the politics of love, that defeat would only be a temporary one. For the God in us would remain alive—to quicken the spirit of those that follow us.

We have, it seems evident, been the kind of people who prefer to be persuaded and told what we must do. And if we are unable as yet to be self-reliant, we have listened to the wrong voices, followed the directions of the wrong signs. But now, as we see what is happening we are anxious and afraid. How can we, we ask, possibly separate ourselves from the institutions of our time? And when ecologists list, one after the

other, the things we did that drained the soil of vitality, poisoned the streams, darkened the atmosphere, made some of the food we eat cancerous, we say that we didn't *know* all that would come as a result. Of course not. How could we know so much? We knew a great deal about machinery, but very little about life. Our language, as certain writers have pointed out, has been expurgated of the very terms of life. It has become mechanistic. And our thought has lost the tone of moral awareness.

What is moral awareness? The question is embarrassing. Scientifically speaking, it is the equivalent of trying to call up ghosts. Moral awareness is the sense of fitness we have—or once had—concerning what is right to do, because of its effect on others, and upon ourselves. It is not what we *know*, but what we feel. Certainties in morality are very few, and we have found it expedient to keep them that way, since constraint of any sort interferes with our freedom. Moreover, we have been taught and have accepted, that morals are only custom, inherited prejudices from a past that had not yet learned about "reality." As E. A. Burtt said, speaking of our instruction by Galileo: "The natural world was portrayed as a vast, self-contained mathematical machine, consisting of motions of matter in space and time, and man with his purposes, feelings, and secondary qualities was shoved apart as an unimportant spectator and semi-real effect of the great mathematical drama outside."

Yet in the present, moral awareness is asserting itself. While unlike the instincts of animals, it gives no commands, it flows into our lives as an air of uncertainty. Like Socrates, it asks questions. It makes you wonder if there is any relation between morality (whatever it is) and what happens in the practical world. You can't, for example, defy physical law without immediate disaster, but moral law, should it exist, doesn't work that way, and how can we be sure that we aren't wasting our time even thinking about it?

Sin, guilt, conscience—we said goodbye to all that at least a century ago. The moral sense, of course, could not evaporate entirely—why, is a relevant question—since people have those uncomfortable feelings when they think about the way they spend their lives, and about the persuasions they respond to, but it has no standing in the august circles where reality is defined for everyone else. But now the present reality has become so unpleasant, human behavior so unlovely, and the proclaimed goals of life so without promise, the door to inner admonitions is finally open again. What sort of "reality" should we assign to these feelings?

For some the answer is easy enough. They rush back to the old religions and revive the moral language of the past. Others, finding themselves unable to give up the principle of scientific thinking, turn to old philosophers and sometimes those called mystics. They may have heard and come to agree with what Josiah Royce once said, that mystics are the only thorough-going empiricists, since they examine the contents of consciousness with the care of a chemical analysis. They have become persuaded that there is something real behind religious philosophy, although they may be far from sure just what. Jacob Needleman is an example of such a thinker, Theodore Roszak another. The work of Arthur Morgan is suffused with moral quality, and Louis Halle is another who seeks in literature for moral principles upon which one can rely. Among the most forthright of contemporary writers in this spirit is Wendell Berry, who sometimes transports biblical imagery to a philosophical and intuitive ground, deepening its imagery. There is this, for example, in one of his *Recollected Essays* (Northpoint Press, 1981):

An exemplary man of faith was Gideon, who reduced his army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred in earnest of his trust, and marched that remnant against the host of the Midianites, armed, not with weapons, but with "a trumpet in every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within pitchers."

Beside this figure of Gideon, the hero as man of faith, let us place our own "defender," the Pentagon, which has faith in nothing except its own power. That, as the story of Gideon makes clear, is a dangerous faith for mere men; it places them in the most dangerous moral circumstances, that of *hubris*, in which one boasts that "mine own hand hath saved me." To be sure, the Pentagon is supposedly founded upon the best intentions and the highest principles and there is a plea that justifies it in the names of Christianity, peace, liberty, and democracy. But the Pentagon is an institution, not a person; and unless constrained by the moral vision of persons in them, institutions move in the direction of power and self-preservation, not high principle. Established, allegedly, in defense of "the free world," the Pentagon subsists complacently upon the involuntary servitude of millions of young men whose birthright, allegedly, is freedom. To wall our enemies out, it is walling us in.

Because its faith rests entirely in its own power, its mode of dealing with the rest of the world is not faith but suspicion. It recognizes no friends, for it knows that the face of friendship is the best disguise by an enemy. It has only enemies, or prospective enemies. It must therefore be prepared for *every possible* eventuality. It sees the future as a dark woods with a gunman behind every tree. It is passing through the valley of the shadow of death without a shepherd, and thus is never still. But as long as it can keep the public infected with its own state of mind, this spiritual disease, it can survive without justification, and grow huge. Whereas the man of faith may go armed with only a trumpet and an empty pitcher and a lamp, the institution of suspicion arms with the death of the world; trusting nobody, it must stand ready to kill everybody.

Berry points out the moral, which is "that those who have no faith are apt to be much encumbered by their equipment, and overborne by their precautions." Indeed—"The Pentagon exists continually, not only on the brink of war, but on the brink of the exhaustion of its moral and material means." Since we, as citizens and taxpayers, supply those moral and material means, we are now learning a little of the meaning of exhaustion. Being "suspicious" is of course the assigned job of the men in the Pentagon; they are highly paid for it and consider suspicion their duty. But their professional morality becomes

ours when their specialty becomes national policy. We are no longer a nation of civilians but a collective force poised to kill *everybody*.

It would of course be "dangerous," too, to abolish the Pentagon and all that it stands for. But that is only because we and other nations with similar armaments have already made the world a very dangerous place. How this can be undone is as mysterious as cleansing the natural world of pollution, and finding ways to order our lives so that there will be less wrong-doing in the world. Such questions are the moral questions before us today. We do not have the answers, but at least we have the questions, and the present task is evolving a language to formulate them more insistently.

By seeking the meaning of life, writers develop the language of a nascent morality. Consider, for example, a paragraph in Louis Halle's *The Search for an Eternal Norm* (University Press, 1981):

Throughout my adult life I have been peculiarly moved by contemplation of the life cycle, and by the logical relationship between that cycle and the survival of the species. The mortality of the individual and the immortality of the kind renewed by each mortal generation, complement each other as parts of one design. The cycle of birth, of growing up, of maturity, of decline, and of death—this has its own harmony and symmetry. It is the ideal design established by God or nature. It is the Logos. Like Pythagoras contemplating the rhythmic order of the spheres, I find in it an unuttered music: it has the same quality of rhythm and regularity, the same logic. I feel as if I am, myself, playing my part in the great pageant of being: performing the life cycle in my own person, marrying, raising children to live after me, ending in completion when my time comes, leaving the succeeding generations to carry on in their turn through the same cycle toward whatever may be an ultimate end of mankind. This is not mysticism but rationalism: it is the apprehension of an *a priori* logic in the universe.

An *a priori* logic is a meaning which is simply there, waiting to be expanded, to be realized as a conscious harmony. A *conscious* harmony is a fulfilled morality, which begins with the thrust of a

deliberately moral life, win or lose. What is the faith Berry spoke of? It is the conviction that the strong effort toward a moral life can lose nothing that is not in *some sense* regained. It cannot help but be regained, if we are really parts of one another, as moral intuition declares.

Once, in a discussion with some of his Japanese students in the University of Tokyo, Lafcadio Hearn said this about reading—reading literature:

As a matter of fact, every book worth reading ought to be read in precisely the same way that a scientific book is read—not simply for amusement; and every book worth reading should have the same amount of value in it that a scientific book has, though the value may be of a totally different kind. For, after all, the good book of fiction or romance or poetry is a scientific work; it has been composed according to the principles of more than one science, but especially according to the principles of the great science of life, the knowledge of human nature.

Hearn, the *literateur*, is a partisan of literature. Yet here he seems entirely right in saying that knowledge of human nature constitutes a science, the science of morality. In literature we discover the few that were masters of the science. How did they become masters? By taking seriously the moral idea with which they began. By insisting on the priority of self-persuasion.

## *REVIEW*

### A MUCH-ABUSED WORD

FANATICISM—a scholarly book by three authors, Miklos Molnar, professor of history at the University of Lausanne, Gérard de Puymége, a historian long associated with Denis de Rougemont, and André Haynal, a psychiatrist on the faculty of the University of Geneva (Schocken, 1983, \$17.95)—is not a book to which one is spontaneously drawn. It deals with the uglier aspects of human nature, as reflected in history, yet reading it may be salutary. For the reader is driven to ask: How much of the fanatic is there in me? The difficulties experienced by the authors in defining "fanatic" and "fanaticism" are sufficient provocation for this question.

In his introduction, Prof. Molnar begins by noting that until recently not much attention has been given to fanaticism—not since the late eighteenth-century days of the French *philosophes*. Then he says:

But lately the idea has made a triumphant reappearance. One can hardly open a newspaper without encountering it. The absurd genocide of millions of Cambodians, massacred almost ritually by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in the name of some mystical *tabula rasa* preliminary to the construction of an illusory utopia, the "inexplicable" collective suicide of some nine hundred followers of the Reverend Jim Jones in the jungles of Guyana, the bloody and puritanical Islamic revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, which outlaws music and mixed swimming and dispatches homosexuals to the firing squad, are just a few examples. This book will attempt to show why it is the concept of fanaticism and not another that is instinctively applied to such events. At the same time, it will set forth the common elements linking such diverse phenomena as the bizarre early Christian sect of the Stylites, the nineteenth-century anarchist Sergei Gennadievich Nechayev, anti-Semitism, and Charles Manson.

This gives a general idea of the content of the book. (We might remark, however, that in a recent issue of *Freedom*, the anarchist journal published in London, in an informative sketch of the life of Nechayev, the writer declares that

Nechayev "had virtually nothing to do with anarchism," except for an interlude of cooperation with Bakunin in 1869.) Molnar deals first with the fact that "fanatic" is almost entirely a pejorative term although we grudgingly admit that the fanatic may have courage, since self-sacrifice is often involved. Molnar notes that fanatical acts typically have what seems a "religious" fire "which has survived the secularization of the modern era and which remains a part of the very basis of our historical consciousness." Proceeding to an aspect of the subject that is usually neglected, he says:

True or false, necessary or useless, the idea is deeply embedded and is organized around a certain number of acts whose protagonists, often labeled fanatics, "made" history. Heroes of a cause, conquerors, builders of empires and temples, revolutionaries, prophets, criminals, all with their followings of fanaticized masses—this is the stuff of which history is made.

There is no doubt that without them history would not exist. It would be a no man's land, outside time, where the mass of men would go about always identical tasks, tasks scarcely modified by the cumulative effects of continual practice. This is a history without movement, a seemingly timeless history. But history cannot be reduced to such continuity. It is also sudden change, violent rupture, upheaval, cataclysm. And everywhere, the rendezvous of fanatics: "authentic" fanatics suffused with the exclusive passion of their Law, "counterfeit" fanatics, cold calculators, manipulators of men and masses. Yet, authentic or counterfeit, history seems theirs. It is they who cross the no man's land with their hordes and their discourses; it is they who ravage it, bloody it, trample it to cut it to pieces and snatch it from static timelessness. Fanatics of all kinds, fanatics of salvation or death, of progress or conservation, of destruction or renewal—we owe to them our religions, our countries, our revolutions, and our wars, as well as the temporal sequences of our past. A bad history, then? Neither bad nor good, but, quite simply ours.

This may seem persuasive rhetoric, but it requires comparison with another outlook. For example, were the Founding Fathers of the United States fanatics? Sam Adams had his extremist moments but, generally speaking, no one regards

George Washington or the authors of the Federalist Papers as fanatics, or even Tom Paine, if he is read with attention. Not even the British retain this view, as a recent tribute to Paine by Michael Foot makes clear. It may be true that any movement with emotional backing is bound to have some fanatics in its fringes, but it does not seem just to say that without fanatics there would be no history. Rather, they make their disturbing contributions, needing to be understood, but they are certainly not its architects except in some limited and negative sense.

Yet for Molnar the passage quoted above is intended to open the way to some autobiographical reflections—how he, in youthful enthusiasm, adopted views in which he now recognizes what he regards as an element of fanaticism. Turning to psychological analysis, he says:

The fanatic is always the Other. Fanaticism is always bad, eccentric, frenzied, terrifying, threatening. No one recognizes himself as a fanatic, except perhaps a few isolated individuals or limited groups who deliberately flaunt it. Perhaps I was wrong, after all, to agree to provide a historian's contribution to this study. Does fanaticism really even exist as a historical phenomenon—above and beyond, naturally, some isolated cases—or does it boil down to a concept that tells more about the person who utilizes it than about the one it seeks to elucidate?

Or, taking the opposite point of view, does the designation of fanaticism encompass all the excessive, irrational, or fantastic ideologies, actions, or behavior that cannot be reduced to a rational explanation? In this second hypothesis, the historian's difficulty is even greater than in the first: instead of being confronted with a phenomenon that is difficult if not impossible to pin down, he is faced with half of human history. Indeed, from antiquity down to the present, has not history been teeming with manipulators of men, religious fanatics, fanatics with a messianic vocation, or quite simple fanatics for order, power, the will for domination? And, likewise, hasn't it been shot full of masses drunk on blood, wars, conquests? Drunk, too, on words, hope, glory. Or blinded by fear, hate, misery. What, then, are the criteria for "normal" as opposed to "fanatical" behavior? And what can be said about the

circumstances that transform, sometimes overnight, thousands or millions of peace-loving, rational, and ordinary people into fanatics? Do the historian's tools make it possible to draw a clear line between the two?

What this book, then, really accomplishes for the reader is to make him rather careful in the use of the word. We have no real problem in extreme cases. Simeon Stylites, who lived on top of a pillar sixty feet tall for thirty years, never descending, we can call a fanatic without giving offense. What about hunger strikers? At once we need to discriminate. We might find ourselves in the position of calling fanatical anything we cannot imagine ourselves called upon to do; that is not a comfortable thought. But how often have parents told their children excited by some exploit they admire, "But he (or she) is a fanatic!" Obviously, "fanatic" may be a bad word, an easy out, and if the book helps to make this clear, it certainly becomes one worth reading. Real criticism (of something worth criticizing) would usually avoid the term because of how easy it is to apply it.

But when, if the word has any justifiable usage—and we think it does; or that it is not likely to be erased from our vocabulary—when does its meaning change from intense devotion to a cause, which we may or should admire, to an excess which offends not only our good sense but our humanity? If we can find this line of division, then we can use the word legitimately. The real fanatic, one might suggest, is the individual who dehumanizes in his mind those who disagree with him, all who think "otherwise." The Jacobins of the French Revolution did this; the nihilists of nineteenth-century Russia—such as Nechayev—did this; the medieval inquisitors did the same in behalf of an institutionalized fanaticism. Fanatics are those who are ruthless because they are right. The non-fanatic is one who is kind because he is right.

Curiously, the term comes from a Latin root. Soothsayers who interpreted omens were called *fanatic*)—from *fanum* meaning Temple. With this original meaning it is fairly easy to see a transition

to one who claims to speak for the Deity, and fanatics exhibit that sort of certainty. Yet one must not be careless. Bossuet (1627-1704), we learn, scornfully called the Quakers "fanatics," neglecting to note that no human ever came to harm from Quaker aggression or violence. It seems evident that the term is too big a bag, encouraging reduction and simplification, yet it does have an intuitive meaning, suggesting a passion that pulls people out of shape; the point then becoming: what is good shape for humans? And that is where careless use of the term begins. No wonder the authors of this reflective book have given no final definition. They do say, however, that in fanaticism "the absence of tolerance is total." This seems the defining characteristic.

Part I of the book, based on psychoanalysis, ends with this paragraph:

There is no doubt that psychoanalysis has a profound respect for the individual and a skepticism concerning global, collective solutions. It believes in self-determination and in loyalty on a person-to-person basis. But it also knows that all these values are profoundly threatened by ourselves, by the fanatic who lurks in each of us.

Part II is made up of case studies from history. Reading it is both horror story and a chastening experience. Toward the end the authors remark that "fanaticism is neither 'left' nor 'right'."

The French Revolution struck us as a particularly enlightening example of revolutionary fanaticism because it caused the sacred to spill over into the profane, and in so doing created a *justificatory paradigm* of revolutionary terror and intolerance. But there are just as many examples on the side of the counterrevolution.

We have now, perhaps, a working definition of fanaticism, but little or no understanding of its cause. Human nature is still a very large mystery, suggesting caution when we come to definitions of the forms of human behavior.

## COMMENTARY ON TEACHERS

THIS week's "Children" ends with the practice of Socrates, making occasion for quotation from Sidney Hook's account of the Socratic Method (in Joseph Epstein's *Masters—Portraits of Great Teachers*):

Although everyone praises the Socratic method, few really practice it. At its best a search for clarity in the quest for truth, it progresses by the sharpening of concepts and elimination of false hypotheses and notions. Primarily negative in impact, the Socratic method is ideally designed to undermine the dogmas, convictions, and assumptions that one has inherited from tradition and from the surrounding milieu without recognition of their alternatives or awareness of the grounds of belief on which they are founded. It is also effective in critically evaluating the challenges to tradition, the new revelations of popular religion or popular science, the glittering promises of reform and social salvation. It is particularly hard on the revolutionary fanatic who delights in discomfiting defenders of the status quo and is furious when the scalpel of analysis is inserted and twisted into the structure of his own beliefs.

Hook also gives an account of how Cohen taught:

Cohen's class was often an exhilarating experience. We became logical hygienists and terrorized our friends and families, and especially other teachers, with the techniques, and sometimes the pungent expressions, that we picked up observing Cohen in action. . . . We acquired a salutary skepticism of authority in intellectual matters and were able to free ourselves of the hypnosis of the printed word in disputed matters. I recall a class in which Cohen asked us why Thales was considered the father of Western philosophy. "Because he taught that everything was made up of water" was the first answer, which repeated the words of the textbook. "Why should that make him a philosopher—no less a great one?" inquired Cohen. "What would you think of someone who announced that everything was made up of something else in the common world quite distinguishable from it—lead or zinc or paper?" It was agreed that he would have to be a fool or a lunatic, and since Thales was neither, the statement attributed to him was probably not meant to be taken literally. The upshot of the discussion left the student

more impressed with Thales' contribution to geometry, not as a form of measurement, but as an exact logical science quite different from anything that preceded it. Students also acquired a realization that philosophy historically had embraced astronomy and other sciences, which led to a question as relevant today as it ever was: What is the relation between wisdom and knowledge, value and fact?

## CHILDREN

### ... and Ourselves

#### AN INEXHAUSTIBLE SUBJECT

WITH an eye to the skillful setting of issues or questions, William Raspberry begins a column, "Should Kids Be Taught To Think?," by quoting from Matthew Arnold's *Essay in Criticism* (in the *Los Angeles Times* for Jan. 25):

"Oh, send him somewhere they will teach him to think for himself!" Mrs. Shelley answered, "Teach him to think for himself? Oh, my God, teach him rather to think like other people."

Raspberry recites the finding that "there is a decline in the inferential reasoning ability of junior and senior high-school students," and that college students "have far more trouble with complex passages than did their counterparts in the early 1970s." He notes briefly—all too briefly—that television is blamed by some. The intellectually destructive effect of television is the subject of Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood*, a book every parent should read, not so much for instruction in what helps young and old to think as on what tends to make it unlikely or impossible.

Raspberry explores the pros and cons: some educators maintain that the "back to basics" approach concentrates on test-passing instead of thinking, while others say that there should be "deliberate teaching of logical thought processes." But Leslie Hart, who wrote *How the Brain Works*, says that "logical approaches seriously interfere with schools' efforts to bring about learning." We actually learn unpredictably, "in random style," and organizing the learning process in logical terms may get in the way. Einstein told a Cal Tech professor that he discovered his theory by challenging an axiom, and this procedure is not likely to be adopted by teachers of logic. Indeed, it is much more comfortable to "think like other people." All through history, parents and teachers have been dismayed by young people who dare to think for themselves, anticipating the isolation and pain to which it often leads. Then, on the other

side, there is the disappointment of unusual parents who find their offspring stubbornly conventional in outlook. What do we want for our children: "Happiness," or an uncompromising love of truth?

There is a side to this question that is generally ignored, on "democratic" grounds, to which Ortega devoted the entirety of his introductory chapter in *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*, (Norton, 1969). He draws attention to the fact that students determined to "think for themselves" are very few, compared to those who expect and intend to "think like other people." The curriculum is made up of what other people think, at a given moment of history, and the typical student is content to absorb it. But the others, the naturally independent minds, are individuals who feel the profound necessity of truth. They, Ortega says, "will approach this ready-made knowledge with caution, full of suspicion and prejudice, submitting it to criticism, even assuming in advance that what the book says is not true." Such a student, he goes on, "will think that this knowledge does not exist, and he will manage to unmake what is presented as already made." He adds: "It is men like this who are constantly correcting, renewing, recreating science."

Systems, we know—if we have learned anything at all from history—are quite unable to tell the difference between a mere trouble-maker and a creative thinker; the system, which is strongly devoted ("for the good of all") to self-preservation, tries to suppress or eliminate all disturbers of the peace. The Establishment naturally thinks highly of itself and has little use for individuals who threaten to undermine its authority. And all real thinkers have this effect. If we look back to classic times we find that the Buddha's father, having learned from a seer that his son would try to change the world, did everything he could to distract Gautama from his mission, surrounding him with all an ordinary human heart could desire. But the Buddha's heart

was not "ordinary." His father's scheme didn't work, but for most others such designs work very well.

These considerations bear on the idea of learning to think for oneself. Raspberry ends with some common-sense counsels:

Teach a child to think for himself? Or, like Mrs. Shelley teach him logic so that he will "think like other people"? Leave that one to the experts. I offer only this: No child can be taught to think as well as he otherwise might if his homework consists primarily of filling in blanks on a ditto sheet. He may get all the answers right, simply by scanning the assigned reading, without ever having the material engage his brain.

The cheap, non-scientific but logical alternative is to assign the passage and require the student to summarize it in his own words. Do that consistently, and he will not only learn to write a lot better, he will also learn to analyze, evaluate, sort out and synthesize information. That may not be thinking, but it is pretty close.

What *is* thinking? Here illustrations may be better than abstractions. Read, for example, Bernard Bailyn's essay on Tom Paine's *Common Sense*. Paine wanted an immediate declaration of independence for the colonies, but he didn't just "argue" with his readers—who became very numerous. He went behind then prevailing opinion to the unrecognized emotional ground on which it was based. He provided a new starting point for their "logic." He freed them of their allegiance to England by dramatic ridicule that went home. Actually, he went far beyond that objective in his thinking, and paid a heavy price for his later *Age of Reason*. The orthodox of his time simply could not stand the impartial application of thinking to their faith.

The classic example of thinking—which, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out, is *always* dangerous—is of course Socrates. He went about Athens asking people, "What are your first principles? Are they good enough?" No one who does this aggressively will be tolerated by the conventional members of society, who are always

the majority, and Socrates was eliminated for his one-man campaign to get people to think.

## FRONTIERS

### Three Goliaths

THE critical literature of a generation or more has made it clear that the growing problems of the present will not be reduced, but become ever more threatening, unless the ends pursued by a large majority of the people are altered to ethical and socially intelligent goals. Whatever the claims of the classical economists, self-interest is now threatening not only our welfare but our lives. The evidence is clear enough. Consider three areas of concern: unemployment, ever-increasing nuclear and other armaments, and the loss of soil.

An article in *Environment* for last November provides this passage from a recent book, *Fear at Work*, by Richard Kazis and Richard L. Grossman:

Unemployment and underemployment in America are not simply problems affecting an unlucky (or, as some would charge, "lazy") few at the bottom of the economic ladder. Official government unemployment figures indicate that 8.9 per cent of American workers were unemployed at the end of 1981—9,462,000 people. That figure has now passed 10 per cent—over 11 million Americans. For minority workers, 1981 unemployment was almost double the national figure—16.1 per cent. And for minority youth, it was just under 40 per cent.

Unemployment and underemployment waste our nation's greatest resource—the talents and initiative of its people. Moreover, persistent unemployment and underemployment are the cause of widespread poverty. This has been the conclusion of countless analyses and studies, including the Kerner Commission of the 1968 riots. Between 1960 and 1980 official unemployment averaged 5.6 per cent. In this decade it promises to rise even higher. The increase in overseas production by American multinational firms, the reversal of the postwar trend toward expanded government employment, and the new era of automation spurred by breakthroughs in computer technologies are combining to bring America into what could be an extended period of "jobless growth"—economic expansion accompanied by fewer jobs. The private sector continues to be inadequate to the task of putting people to work and eliminating poverty.

Meanwhile, as spending for armaments continues to grow, in the *Washington Spectator* for Feb. 1 Tristram Coffin writes on the "Grass Roots Revolt against Nuclear Weapons." His report is somewhat anecdotal but convincing. In one place he says:

Admiral Hyman Rickover, father of the nuclear navy says that nuclear weapons must be abolished if the world is to be saved from a nuclear horror. A pillar of the Senate Establishment, Mark Hatfield (D-Ore.), argues that modern weapons of mass destruction "push us closer to the abyss." More than 3,000 college professors in the Chicago area declare in a petition, "Our work of teaching and research is directed to the future, but the mounting risk of nuclear holocaust puts the future in doubt." . . .

The chairman of the military funding subcommittee, Rep. Joseph Addabbo (D-N.Y.), pointed out, "It took Congress over 40 years to appropriate \$2 trillion for defense, and the Pentagon now plans to spend almost that much in 60 months."

The *Spectator* editor next turns to evidence that "many of the weapons are high-technological junk." He writes paragraph after paragraph on the waste of military spending and on new weapons that demonstrably don't work reliably. He quotes a former Secretary of Defense who says that "Our first-line fighters, the Air Force's F-15, is currently ready (full mission capable) about 35% of the time." Comment on the MX is devastating, and James Fallows is quoted as saying in general that "Modern armaments have become increasingly remote from military and economic reality . . . and have 'eroded' national economies by erecting a perverse hierarchy of values." (These may not be flaws and inefficiencies peace-lovers are eager to correct, but the report is nonetheless revealing.)

In a talk before the meeting of the Schumacher Society in 1981, Wes Jackson, of the Land Institute, began by saying:

I think the number one environmental problem, aside from nuclear war, is agriculture. Industrial pollution and material and energy resource depletion are serious, but even though industrial society seems likely to one day collapse to a point, almost beyond recognition, agriculture would not have to sink to such depths if we can keep our soil and water

resources intact. The fact that till agriculture sends soil seaward and destroys the water-holding capacity of the soil, in my view, is the problem *of* agriculture.

The contamination and loss of the soil resource, in the long run, is the loss of ourselves as a people. Soil loss is a problem for the short-run, too. From a summation of numerous studies done in the corn-belt states, one can conclude that with a 2-inch soil loss, yield is reduced 15%, with a 4-inch loss, 22%; 6 inches—30%; 8 inches—41%; 10 inches—57%; and 12 inches—75%. The consequence varies with the area of course and depends on the type of soil and how deep it is. During an extreme downpour such as occurred in southwest Iowa in May 1950, up to 250 tons may be lost per acre. We are now losing from two to four billion tons of soil each year, depending on which estimate we accept. If it is 4 billion tons, it is equal to the loss of 7 inches of soil from 4 million acres.

If we assume a middle estimate of 3 billion tons of soil/ year, more than 50 million tons of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium are lost.

In confirmation of this dire prediction, Wes Jackson points to once fertile areas around the world which are now sterile deserts. He is working on an alternative to this destiny for the United States—lots of local forests, patch (small) gardens, and the development of food grains out of perennial grasses that hold the soil in place. (For further information, write to the Land Institute, Route 3, Salina, Kans. 67401.)

What can we do about all this? A change in the methods of agriculture can at least be begun by individuals, and all over the country people are doing it. The remedy for unemployment may seem more difficult, and it will certainly take time. The basic solution is to find a way to become self-employed and where possible to have economic relations with others of the same mind and intentions. The idea is to work toward increasingly *direct* relations with the sources of life-support. The governmental and economic institutions of our time are creatures of the mode of thinking and acting that have created these apparently insuperable problems. *They will never* initiate the essential changes, even if individual administrators do all they can. Powerful

institutions are almost entirely based on self-interest—which for government is sovereignty, and for industry and commerce is profit.

Only the gradual spread of ways and means which are not based on self-interest, but on mutual welfare and cooperation with nature, can change the world we live in. There are those who have made substantial beginnings in this direction. Their number must increase. There is absolutely nothing else to do. People who are discouraged by this prospect need to recognize the extraordinary ingenuity and effectiveness of such pioneers.