A DESIGNER'S APPROACH

UNDERSTANDING the way people pick issues to get concerned about may be fully as important as forming clear ideas about right and wrong and then shaping a program of action. There is certainly a direct relation between how people pick issues and what they identify as good or evil. It is natural to regard anything that causes pain as bad and requiring elimination. This, at any rate, is the to-be-expected response of the majority of people. There are other responses, but this one seems to make the prevailing patterns of history.

For example, in 1910 Norman Angell wrote in *The Great Illusion*—a book pointing out the folly and stupidity of war:

> If Russia does England an injury—sinks a fishing fleet in time of peace, for instance—it is no satisfaction to Englishmen to go out and kill a lot of Frenchmen or Irishmen. They want to kill Russians. If, however, they knew a little less geography—if, for instance, they were Chinese Boxers, it would not matter in the least which they killed, because to the Chinaman all alike are "foreign devils"; his knowledge of the case does not enable him to differentiate between the various nationalities of Europeans. In the case of a wronged Negro in the Congo the collective responsibility is still wider; for a wrong committed by one white man he will avenge himself on any other—American, German, English, French, Dutch, Belgian, or Chinese. As our knowledge increases, our sense of the collective responsibility of outside groups narrows. But immediately we start on this differentiation there is no stopping. The English yokel is satisfied if he can "get a whack at them foreigners"—Germans will do if Russians are not available. The more educated man wants Russians; but if he stops a moment longer, he will see that in killing Russian peasants he might as well be killing so many Hindoos, for all they had to do with the matter. He then wants to get at the Russian Government. But so do a great many Russians—Liberals, Reformers, etc. He then sees that the real conflict is not English against Russians at all, but the interest of all law-abiding folk—Russian and English alike—against oppression, corruption, and incompetence. . . . An English patriot recently said,

"We must smash Prussianism." The majority of Germans are in cordial agreement with him, and are working to that end. But if England went to war for that purpose, Germans would be compelled to fight for Prussianism. War between States for a political ideal of its kind is not only futile, it is the sure means of perpetuating the very condition which it would bring to an end. International hostilities repose for the most part upon our conception of the foreign State, with which we are quarreling, as a homogeneous personality, having the same character of responsibility as an individual, whereas the variety of interests, both material and moral, regardless of State boundaries, renders the analogy between nations and individuals an utterly false one.

No one needs instruction in the fact that the wars between states are still proposed and maintained in exactly this way, Norman Angell's lucid common sense having had little effect. During the recent adventure of the United States in Vietnam, State Department employees were in danger of losing their jobs if they even whispered that the conflict between North and South Vietnam looked more like a civil war than part of the drive of Asian Communism to regional or world domination. War, in short, is a primitive response provoked by a superficial and ignorant conception of the origin of evil. That thinking and response, then, are what need understanding and correction. The wars will solve no problems, but will go on making conditions worse and worse. Is any other conclusion possible from human experience since 1910?

How can we free ourselves from this animistic personification of the Nation-State? Well, a nation is what we call an institution, a kind of focus for human qualities which are abstracted, depersonalized, and aimed for specific action. The institutions of modern, industrial society are many and various, and often highly organized. Generally speaking, critics find them the chief source of the evil experienced by humans. Yet

reformers (most of them) regard institutions as the only effective instruments for accomplishing human good. Sociologists simply say that they are inevitable, suggesting that we learn how to make better use of them. One of their roles is well described by Laurens van der Post:

> No human being or society, however self-sufficient and rational it may appear, can live without institutions that deal with those aspects of life which cannot be explained rationally. No community can be left indefinitely outside in the night of the human spirit in the beast-infested jungle which lies beyond the conscious fortifications which civilization raises for *us* in life.

Institutions, in other words, establish our relations with the aspects of experience we are unable (or believe we are unable) to deal with as individuals. We need, for example, an orderly community in which to live, providing means (such as the courts) for nonviolent settlement of disputes. So we evolve governments and give them power, making them sovereign states—and then the states, as we have seen, become agents which generate disorder, violence and war on a scale that has become almost unimaginable. Our institutional means, in short, turn out to be double-edged. Meant to do good, they end as self-perpetuating sources of evil.

Think of the history of the corporation, developed to combine the energies of men with capital in ways that will serve the unified purposes of entrepreneurs. That in union there is strength is a truth acknowledged by all. But the price of the strength is a confinement or limitation of meaning—an elimination, for the sake of single-minded purpose, of values left out as irrelevant to corporate intent. This justifies another broad generalization about institutionalized society, one by Ortega (in *Man and People*), in which he takes note of the ever-present conflict among various institutional interests and between individuals and institutions, despite the services of the latter, on which we now so largely depend:

> This is enough to make us realize that giving the name of "society" to a collectivity is a euphemism that falsifies our vision of collective "life." So-called "society" is never what the name promises. It is always at the same time, to one or another degree, *dis-society,* repulsion between individuals. Since on the other hand it claims to be the opposite we must radically open ourselves to the conviction that society is a reality that is *constitutively* sick, defective— strictly it is a never-ending struggle between its genuinely social elements and behaviors and its dissociative or antisocial elements and behaviors. For a minimum of sociability to predominate and *eo ipso* for any society to endure as such, it must frequently summon its internal "public power" to intervene in violent form and even—when the society develops and ceases to be primitive—to create a special body charged with making that power function in irresistible form. This is what is commonly called the State.

Those who carry their reflections to this point usually begin to wonder if it is possible to abolish the State. Generally speaking, analysis of the State and its power is insightful and valuable. Dwight Macdonald's *The Root Is Man,* including his essay, "The Responsibility of Peoples," presents some of the best modern criticism. Martin Buber has much to say concerning the moral decay associated with state or collectivist power, and Charles Hamilton, in his introduction to the Free Life edition of Franz Oppenheimer's *The State,* explores the growing literature of stateless societies in a quest for less self-destructive forms of association. Meanwhile, in the area of environmental concern, the movement in behalf of regionalism, with its ideal of the Ecoregion, has active champions of the stature of Ian McHarg and Eugene Odum in the United States, E. F. Schumacher in England, and Denis de Rougement in France. *Blueprint for Survival,* issued by the English *Ecologist* a few years ago, is another example of how this thinking is taking hold. (A critical bibliography o£ the literature on and related to this trend would be a valuable contribution.)

What is the significance of Regionalism in relation to the more obvious evils of institutions? Well, regional autonomy would reduce the size, responsibility, and power of national government,

making the public good more of an ad hoc community affair, without any functionless nonsense about "sovereignty." The thinking along these lines is filled with common sense. Summarizing the central idea of Leopold Kohr's *The Over-Developed Nations,* Nigel Dennis said recently (in the *London Telegraph* for April 24):

> Once a national economy has overshot its critical size, it cannot be described as either capitalist or communist. Whether Russian or American, it is simply "collectivist." The Keynesian notion of a government acting as a sort of occasional "regulator" becomes absurd. The greater the businesses the more certain their absolute control by government becomes. And the greater control by government, the greater the horde of bureaucrats and the smaller the freedom of the individual.

A terse statement by Ivan Illich makes similar judgment:

> Any social structure must disintegrate beyond some level of energy use. Beyond this critical level, education for bureaucracy must take the place of initiative within the law. . . . technocracy must prevail when mechanical power exceeds metabolic energy by a certain ratio.

With such cogent arguments (capable of endlessly confirming development) against it, why does "bigness" continue to have a hold on public opinion? Mainly, we suppose, because bigness in industry makes possible enormous volume of production resulting in lower prices for desired goods and services. The consumer, it is argued, benefits. But this is a demoralizing illusion. Illich's criticism finds the moral flaw in consumerism responsible for a large train of ills. He said recently (during an interview by *Human Behavior,* February, 1977):

> In short, the myth of unending consumption has taken the place of life everlasting. We demand everything because we've been trained to expect that anything we can visualize can be supplied by some institution. If atomic waste is poisoning us, today, don't worry because *somehow* we'll find an answer tomorrow. And, of course, the answers will be found through giant institutions, because we have accepted a paralysis of human action at the community level,

convinced that family and community are no longer capable of solving problems in a shared manner.

> As good consumers and taxpayers, we demand that large government and private organizations provide us with better service as customers. In doing so, we abdicate our right to more liberty and wind up being managed by a privileged class. And this privileged class becomes the yardstick by which we measure our own achievements. Deprived minorities are encouraged to go to school and dream of becoming managers themselves, even though the deck is rigged so that privilege is inherited by the children of the privileged.

Bigness, in other words, makes possible and requires vast complication in administration, so that the relation between cause and effect can no longer be understood, even by those who try to keep things going. In such a situation, propaganda and doctrine are inevitably preferred to intelligence and common sense.

Sometimes the argument about good and evil becomes mainly a dispute between those who demand the *right* institutions and those who declare for small ones. But whatever the ultimate source of evil—and we are inclined to think, following the Buddha, that it springs from the feeling of separateness and the irrational drives of craving—the best of this argument seems to lie with the advocates of smallness. At the social or political level, which has to be carefully distinguished from the level of individual characterological growth and reform, the good designer always seems to know more than the moralist. This sort of confrontation is illustrated in the interchange between Gordon Lewis, a critic of Leopold Kohr's *The City of Man,* and the author. We quote only from Prof. Kohr's reply, which sufficiently reveals both sides of the argument. Mr. Lewis contends that in giving examples of the superior life in the small communities of the past, Kohr has ignored the objectionable morality of the social systems which then prevailed. Prof. Kohr writes:

> Measuring his "words carefully," he [Lewis] says that "if a Stalin or Hitler had left behind them a finely planned city, Kohr might be half ready to

forgive them their massive crimes," and promptly forgives a few paragraphs later both the massive crimes of Stalin's Soviet Union for having "retained intact the treasures of St. Petersburg," and the revolting victory executions of opponents and dissenters in socialist Cuba because "it is socialist Cuba that has for the first time engineered a real balance between city and countryside." Had he bothered to measure my words as carefully as his, he would have known that . . . as far as I am concerned, there is no distinction between governments that kill, and killers who govern. It makes no difference whether the name is Hitler or Batista, Stalin or Castro. As an anarchist dissenter, I would not have had much chance under either pair. . . .

Another point Lewis makes is that my heroes in city building are the Medieval Church and territorial aristocracy but that I fail to stress the immense wealth which supported their activities and scandalized everyone except presumably Leopold Kohr. He does not mention that my heroes as urban site selectors and aesthetes include also three Other classes: the military, the inn keepers, and the slum dwellers. Indeed it is particularly the slum dwellers whom I have singled out for their unrivalled sense of urban beauty and location. . . . And as to the scandalous wealth of the medieval church, its accumulation was due not because the church was the church but because, like the manor, she was in many instances the state (or like the state) in whose hands—for those who are disturbed by it—accumulated wealth is equally suspect whether it is Catholic, Calvinist, Arabic, Kremlinist, Capitalist, or Castroite. (San *Juan Star,* April 17, 1977.)

We come now to a searching—and unsettling—part of Prof. Kohr's argument:

This is also why I have not used class—a particularly English obsession—as a tool of urban analysis. My volume is about The City of Man, not The City of Proles. Nor have I for that matter dealt with the argument that the beauty of Greek cities was based on a society of slaves. Of course it was. Should I therefore despise beauty? All societies except the smallest are societies of slaves. When Marx spoke of "wage slaves" he referred to the inhabitants not of Greece but of factories whose enslavement to assembly line and machine technology is as bad in socialist as in capitalist societies. . . . The point is that slavery, irrespective of legal form and etiquette, is part not of the capitalist order nor of the socialist order but of the natural order. This is what Aristotle maintained, who, contrary to Lewis'

assertion, did not come out "in defense of slavery." He simply stated that there are "natural" slaves and "natural" free men. But he also stated that natural free men often find themselves in the category of legal slaves, while natural slaves are often found among those who are legally classified as free men. What mattered was who you were, not what you were. As Horace said of the Roman master race: "Captive Greece made captive her rude conqueror." And when the philosopher Diogenes found himself a captive on the slave market of Corinth, he knew what he was talking about when he told his owner at the sight of a passer-by: "Hey, sell me to that man over there!

He looks as if he were in need of a master."

Prof. Kohr explains, firally, that he did not write a book about the wickedness of various institutions, but about the City of Man. He did not concern himself with the City of God or the City of Socialism. "What I meant to dwell upon was the essence of the good life as the ultimate target of human aspirations, not the boredom of classlessness; on the role of urban beauty, not of status." He seems to be saying, as well, that the evil of institutions is a constant in all human societies, and that keeping them small is the only remedy for such ills, until such time as human beings learn how to live with one another with mutual understanding.

The issue, raised by Prof. Kohr, of "natural slaves" remains to be considered. The phrase itself practically outlaws discussion, but what he meant might be put in other language. For example, *Liberation* for June presented an essay by Paul Goodman entitled "The Psychology of Being Powerless." It seems fair to say that there is little difference between being a slave and being powerless. Goodman helps the reader to release his thinking from the emotional domination of charged words:

The psychology of historical powerlessness is evident in the reporting in and the reading of the newspapers: there is little analysis of how events are building up, but we read—with excitement, spite, or fatalism, depending on our characters—the headlines of crises for which we are unprepared. Statesmen cope with emergencies, and the climate of emergency is chronic.

Some of these historical conditions are not inevitable at all but are the working-out of willful policies that aggrandize certain interests and exclude others, that subsidize certain styles and prohibit others. But of course historically, if almost everybody believes the conditions are inevitable, including the policy-makers who produce them, then they are inevitable. For to cope with emergencies does not mean, then, to support alternative conditions, but further to support and institutionalize the same conditions. Thus, if there are too many cars, we build new highways; if administration is too cumbersome, we build in new levels of administration; if there is a nuclear threat, we develop anti-missile missiles; if there is urban crowding and anomie we step up urban renewal and social work; if there are ecological disasters because of imprudent use of technology, we subsidize research and development by the same scientific corporations working for the same ecologically irrelevant motives; if there is youth alienation, we extend and intensify processing in the schools; if the nation-state is outmoded as a political form, we make ourselves into a mightier nation.

Goodman, in effect, is saying that slavishness is a subjective psychological attribute, and Kohr has argued that this is what really counts when you talk about slavery. Goodman concludes:

Common people, who do not have to govern, can let themselves feel powerless and resign themselves. They respond with the familiar combination of not caring and, as a substitute, identifying with those whom they fancy to be powerful. . . . It is always necessary to explain to non-Americans that middle-class Americans are not so foolish and piggish about their standard of living as it seems; it is that the standard of living has to provide all the achievement and value that are open to them. But it is a strange thing for a society to be proud of its standard of living, rather than taking it for granted as a background for worthwhile action.

When the prisoners (slaves) of a "to have and to hold" psychology find themselves more and more among the "have-nots," anxiety may finally turn to rage.

The most dangerous group of all, however, is the established but anomie middle class. . . . Exclusive, conformist, squeamish, and methodical, it is terribly vulnerable to anxiety. . . . The conditions of middle-class life are exquisitely calculated to increase tension and heighten anxiety. It is not so much that the pace is fast—often it consists of waiting around and is slow and boring—but that it is somebody else's pace or schedule. One is continually interrupted. And the tensions cannot be normally discharged by doing things one's own way. There is competitive pressure to act a role, yet paradoxically one is rarely allowed to do one's best or use one's best judgment. . . . All this is what Freud called civilization and its discontents.

Are we any closer to determining the sources of evil than the ideologists?

REVIEW
THE WRITER'S SCIENCE AND ART

Is there any "science" used or applied by the artist who produces works of the imagination? An answer to this question is supplied by John Gardner in an article, "Moral Fiction," in the *Hudson Review* for the Winter of 1976-77. One gathers that the writer of moral fiction accepts certain responsibilities. His view of the meaning of what he is doing generates the guiding rules. Mr. Gardner says:

> One begins a work of fiction with certain clear opinions—for instance I myself begin with in a recent novel, *October Light,* that traditional New England values are the values we should live by: good workmanship, independence, unswerving honesty, and so on—and one tests those values in lifelike situations, puts them under every kind of pressure one can think of, always being fair to the other side, and what one slowly discovers, resisting all the way, is that one's original opinion was oversimple. This is not to say, by any means, that there are no values; only to say that a simulation of real experience is morally educational. To the writer at least, such an experience proves that Aristotle was correct: fiction is a mode of thought—the artist's equivalent to the scientific method—and therefore anything but frivolous.

The moral—not moralistic—writer, Mr. Gardner says, practices an art which is not merely ornamental or rhetorically persuasive: "it controls the argument and gives it its rigor, forces the writer to intense yet dispassionate and unprejudiced watchfulness, drives him—in ways abstract logic cannot match—to unexpected discoveries and, frequently, a change of mind." In other words, an artist may start out with certain things to say, certain reasons for writing, but if at the end what he intended has not been in some way transformed, made more complex, yet perhaps simpler and subtler, then nothing much has happened in the way of art. The author has taken no risks, never opened himself to the possibility of being reversed by the facts of life.

What does the writer test himself against? He has a dialogue with himself, or with nature or reality through himself. He must ask how close he has come to natural realities in his characters, wonder about probabilities, and whether, at a certain moment, one of them would be likely or able to act in a certain way. One could say that the good writer must have an educated imagination which works on the basis of past experience up to some point of momentous choice, and then adventures beyond:

> Much of what a writer learns he simply learns by imitation. Making up a scene, he asks himself at every step, "Would she really say that?" or "Would he really throw the shoe?" He plays the scene through in his imagination, taking all the parts, being absolutely fair to everyone involved (mimicking each in turn, as Aristotle pointed out, and never sinking to stereotype for even the most minor characters), and when he finishes the scene he understands by sympathetic imitation what each character has done throughout and why the fight, or accident, or whatever, developed as it did. . . . Throughout the entire chain of causally related events, the writer asks himself, would *a* really cause *b*—and not *c*, etc., and he creates what seems, at least by the test of his own normal imagination and experience of the world, an inevitable development of story. Inevitability does not depend, of course, on realism. Some or all of the characters may be fabulous—dragons, griffins, Achilles' talking horses—but once a character is established for a creature, the creature must act in accord with it.

> To learn about reality by mimicking it, needless to say, the writer must never cheat, never play tricks. He may establish any sort of *givens* he may please, but once they are established he must follow where, in his experience, nature would lead if there really were, say, griffins.

All this has to do with what the writer knows from past experience. But in stories about people, the interesting parts are the tenuous bridges between past and future, the places where characters *choose* to do one thing or another. This is the time of danger: How can the story-teller *know* what they will do? The drama of the tale exists because the reader doesn't know, and Mr. Gardner's point is that the writer must school

himself in the ranges of the possible, not the inevitable:

> Moral fiction communicates meanings discovered by the process of the fiction's creation. We can see the process working when we look through the drafts of a certain kind of writer's work. Thus we see Tolstoy beginning with one set of ideas and attitudes in *Two Marriages,* an early draft of *Anna Karenina*—in which Anna, incredible as it seems marries Vronsky—and gradually discovering, draft by draft, deeper and deeper implications in his story, revising his judgments, stumbling upon connections reaching new insights, until finally he nails down the attitudes and ideas we find dramatized, with such finality and conviction that it seems to us unthinkable that they should not have burst full-grown from Tolstoy's head, in the published novel. So Dostoevsky agonized over the better or worse implications of Myshkin's innocence and impotence. We see the same when we look at successive drafts of work by Kafka, or even the two drafts of Chaucer's *Troilas and Criseyde.*

Quite plainly, there is no work of art without conception, pregnancy, and travail. The writer must "act out" the whole story for himself to test its authenticity. And when it comes to choices, he lays his idea of human identity on the line. He might say to himself, for example: If you really *know* what another human being will do in some set of circumstances, he is not really "human" in that relation, but either sub-human or superhuman. To make a wholly predictable response in a given situation means that the response was settled far in the past, leaving no real choice in the present. This is why stories about people are more interesting than stories about animals. Animals are more or less predictable, so that the patterns of their actions, once known and typed, provide no suspense. They may have charm, splendor, and great courage, but no suspense. What they do is part of the pageant, not the drama, of life. The gods present similar problems. Either they always do everything right—no human mixture of good and evil for them—or they can do any*thing.* Either way, suspense is lacking.

Some months ago we quoted from Joseph Wood Krutch's brief essay, "Novelists Know What Philosophers Don't," a passage which fits in here:

> The best as well as the most effective works of art may sometimes be those in which the author is in pursuit of a truth but the only reason for composing a novel or a play instead of a treatise is that the author is unwilling to reduce to a formula an insight which he can present only through a concrete situation whose implications he can sense but only sense. Once the meaning of a work of art can be adequately stated in abstract terms is ceases to have any *raison d'être.* It has ceased to be truer than philosophy just so long as—and no longer than—there are truths which elude formulation into laws.

What we know as law—established, indisputable fact or reality—is what we stand on. Our certain realities are incorporated in our present being, the consolidation of our past. It is our "perfect" knowledge, expressed, you could say, as instinct, or as what we know and are able to act on without deliberation or any new decision-making. Krutch calls this "philosophy," by which he means what has been abstracted and generalized in timeless form. Science seems a more accurate term for this. Plato was a philosopher, a lover and pursuer of truth, but his work is filled with the elements of art. It is only since philosophers have been trying to behave like scientists that Krutch's identification of them as generalizers of known fact applies. He seems aware of this when he says:

> And it is just the philosophical superiority of art, not only that it suggests the complexity of life and of art, but also that it is everywhere closer to the most genuine and the most justifiable portions of man's thinking about life.

One thing leads to another. There is an analogue of the artist's kind of discovery in the practice of great scientists. Giving attention to Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space,* Wylie Sypher remarks that for the poet, only the first time counts, while for the scientist, *as* scientist, only the second time—establishing confirmation—

counts. As Mr. Sypher puts it (*American Scholar,* Winter 1967-68):

> This first time the astronomer feels his wild surmise he is a poet, and the poetry in science is this instant of revelation or epiphany. Then his discovery must be reduced before it is reliable science. So Bachelard describes science as a way of organizing our disappointments under the guise of knowledge. Knowledge in scientific form is coherent disillusion, a sacrifice of discovery to concepts and systems, a loss of an epiphany.

This is of course a one-sided account of science, but our concern, here, is with the approach to the unpredictable. This means learning to distinguish what is legitimately reduced to law—disposed of, therefore, as no longer a source of questioning or suspense—from the mysterious and wonderful and unpredictable in human life. The misapplications of "certainty" we see all about are abuses of science and betrayals of human possibility. Wylie Sypher remarks:

> . . . by using an adequate method we can rule out the unexpected, and so accurately realize and predict human behavior that even those who resist a certain program can be rendered ineffective in advance. . . . Thus we can be stripped of choices, since the technician can deceive us into believing we are free when we are not.

But not always, and not everyone. Not the artist who will not cheat; not the poet able to handle *his* encounter with the Grand Inquisitor and then set his Ariel, his imagination, free.

COMMENTARY
IN ORDER TO BE HUMAN

THE final volume of *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White, written during World War II but left unpublished, perhaps because it is a wonderful fable on the folly of war, has just been issued by the University of Texas Press. The closing passages appear in the September *Harper's,* titled "The Book of Merlyn." The time is the eve of Anthur's final battle with Mordred, in which he will die. Deeply depressed by the apparently incurable human tendency to aggression, the old king seeks help from Merlyn and from a committee of animals who seem to conduct their affairs much more wisely than men. The animals recite their counsel, but it remains for Merlyn to point out that humans, unlike animal species, have their own distinctive task, which is *to think.* But even love of truth brings a trail of disasters, leading Arthur to melancholy musings:

> He saw the vast army of martyrs who were his witnesses: young men who had gone out even in the first joy of marriage, to be killed on dirty battlefields like Bedegraine for other men's beliefs: but who had gone out voluntarily: but who had gone because they thought it was right: but who had gone although they hated it. They had been ignorant young men perhaps, and the things which they had died for had been useless. But their ignorance had been innocent. They had done something horribly difficult in their ignorant innocence, which was not for themselves. . .

> That was it, to mean well! He caught a glimpse of that extraordinary faculty in man, that strange, altruistic, rare, and obstinate decency which will make writers or scientists maintain their truths at the risk of death. . . . The truth. To recognize and acknowledge What Is. That was the thing which man could do, which his English could do, his beloved his sleeping, his now defenceless English. . . . But then again there came the wave of sorrow over him . . . the thought of the man-child when he woke: the thought of that cruel and brutish majority. . . . How few and pitifully few the ones who would be ready to maintain it!

The first step, Merlyn concluded, would be to deny the false claim that Might is Right, for then the people might recognize the need to abolish the State.

Inspired, perhaps, by T. H. White's fable, the *Harper's* editor, Lewis Lapham, devotes his "Easy Chair" to the paralysis of the will accomplished by propaganda for war—how it works, why we are fooled. Both fable and editorial are enriching.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
REFLECTIONS ON PSYCHOLOGY

IN *New Directions in Teaching* (Spring, 1977) G. Edward Hughes notes that while students "appear to be flocking to almost any course that implies psychological overtones," it is likely that, by the semester's end, many of them will "breathe an unusual sigh of relief and vow never to return to the study of psychology again." The reason is disillusionment. The students discover that psychology isn't what they thought it to be. Mr. Hughes says:

> As most college instructors, those of us who teach introductory psychology courses find ourselves continuously caught between two seemingly opposite forces. On the one hand there are our own predetermined course desires as set forth in the abominable course syllabus; on the other hand there are the desires of our students, desires that too often go unnoticed.

What is the hope or expectation of students? Mr. Hughes reports on the ones that come to him:

> When I ask my students why they enrolled in the class or what they want to learn about psychology, two themes emerge. First, they believe that the course will help them better understand themselves. Second, these students want to be better able to cope with life in an ever-changing world. They especially want to know how to effectively communicate and get along with other people. They seem to be struggling with life and they hope that psychology will provide them with some insights about themselves and their world.

While, obviously, no introductory course could do all this, whatever it does do, the writer says, it shouldn't make students feel that self-study and self-understanding are irrelevant to academic psychology. Yet the texts they study will seem to have no relation to the things the students want to kind out about:

> To be certain, most of us proceed with our unit by unit, textbook-prepared lectures on the assumption that we, the teacher, know the material and they, the students, do not. With such cold rationalization we feel justified in imposing our discipline-oriented standards, subject-matter and methods on the students. However, if we would merely reflect on our own training we should remember that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." To artificially break apart the subject for pedagogical reasons is one thing, but when we fail to

adequately rejoin the estranged parts, we often destroy the subject s vitality and meaning for the students.

> Have we become so well conditioned by our past academic experiences that we can no longer break away from our drooling dogs, pecking pigeons and running rats long enough to realistically explore the human side of behavior with our students? Can we not take the course expectations into account and genuinely attempt to merge them with those of our own? Can we not expose our students to the psychology that we found to be exciting and fascinating? . . . John Dewey once stated: "The most important attitude to be formed is that of a desire to go on learning."

This is neither a new story nor a novel complaint. The situation, apparently, has changed hardly at all since we published fifteen years ago (in Frontiers, April 4, 1962) a letter from a student who was having exactly the trouble Mr. Hughes describes. Psychology, the student was told, admits only objectively testable material, while Jung is not scientific, and Dostoevsky belongs to literature. When the student said he was interested in finding out about himself, he was asked: "Should you be in therapy?", as though the desire for self-knowledge is a form of deviant behavior.

Scientific psychology, he was given to understand, is a specialty, and if you want to study it you must abide by its rules, definitions, and limited areas of interest. Reflecting on this, the student wondered:

> Are there facts which are not "scientific facts," which I could find as being real and pertaining to a self-fulfilling life? And if there are such truths, is it possible that some of them, at least, ought to be the material of psychology?

Who, today, could quarrel with either the substance or the spirit of this question? There must be countless students and numerous teachers (like Mr. Hughes) who feel this way. Why, then, is change or reform in the teaching of psychology proceeding so slowly?

Hughes thinks academic tradition and habit are at fault, along with, perhaps, the secret hope of some teachers that a student who follows in the beaten path will some day receive the Nobel prize in psychology—"exclaiming to all the world that his success was due largely to our inspirational guidance during his early years of study." While such conceits

may play a part, the real explanation for the weaknesses of modern psychology probably lies much deeper.

Why, for example, has no psychologist (was Pavlov a psychologist?) ever won a Nobel prize? Mainly, we think, for the reason that Psychology doesn't know what it is and has allowed its identity to be fabricated according to the canons of other disciplines.

What if the students are asking exactly the right questions, and the professors are supplying either wrong or irrelevant answers?

More than fifty years ago, a German professor put his finger on the reason for this confusion. "Psychology," he said, "long ago lost its soul, and is now rapidly losing its mind." While the soul is admittedly not a scientific conception, and the mind is still a dubious reality so far as definitions go, the fact remains that human beings attach profoundly important meanings to these terms, and if human longing is a significant element in psychological studies, these meanings cannot be ignored. But they *are* ignored; that is, they are ignored unless they can be reduced to some specious form of objectivity and then dealt with merely as "notions" rather than forces or powers in human life.

If the students are right in asking their questions, what then should psychologists do about them? Well, first of all, they might admit the value, necessity, and relevance of the questions, going on to point out that they are essentially *philosophical* questions, adding, immediately thereafter, that psychology obtains its mandate from philosophy and is very largely dependent upon philosophical assumptions for the significance, if any, of its conclusions. Philosophy is concerned with values in life and thought—it is *thinking* about them—and psychology studies how we think. It follows that any psychology which ignores consideration of values as the foundation of its content is not psychology and cannot be psychology for any *normal* human being. Values determine what we care about, look for, want, or want to avoid. Psychology, then, is the study of the arena where subjective reality is in continual contact with objective reality, and since objective reality is the region of public truth, while subjective reality is private and individual, Psychology is the science which is under the necessity of dealing with both non-scientific and scientific matters, facts, and possibilities. In short, so far as prevailing ideas and academic practice are concerned, Psychology is very nearly a contradiction in terms.

But this is intolerable! You *can't* have a science which at one end of its territory is properly grounded in observation, supportable hypothesis, and methods of confirmation, and at the other is filled with intuitions about good and evil, moral judgments, and assumptions about self and being which are inevitably metaphysical constructs! One side or the other must go—and this, indeed, is exactly what happened to Psychology in the past. In order to qualify their work as scientific, the psychologists left out the region of subjective reality and attempted to make a proper scientific specialty out of what was left.

But the true content of psychology is not and cannot be a "specialty." A scientific discipline has definable means for reaching finite conclusions about limited areas of experience. The questions students present to the teachers of introductory psychology violate all these conditions. Finding out who and what we are and where we are going does not represent questions about a limited area of experience: *Everyone* needs and wants to know about these things.

The problems we encounter as human beings, whether objectively or subjectively, may have some objective definition, but not the solutions. The solutions, when they are found, have only ethical and rational validation, and an intrinsic aspect of this validation is that it depends entirely upon subjective, voluntary assent. Psychology, in other words, is not a subject to be taught but a problem or dilemma to be investigated. An introductory course in psychology might best give most of its time to showing why this is so.

FRONTIERS
Less than Encouraging

LAND, food, and technology are without doubt the most frequently explored problem areas these days. Following are some quotations selected from periodicals and newsletters—first one from *Voice of Women/La Voix des Femmes,* published in Canada:

> Of the 97 developing countries, 61 had a deficit in food energy supplies in 1970.

> In all the developing countries, 460 million people (one-half children) suffer malnutrition, because they do not eat enough to pursue daily activities. The fact is that millions are starving. . . . Children are handicapped mentally and physically, vulnerable to disease and likely to die young. As a side-effect it is virtually impossible to decrease birth rates where parents want more children as insurance that at least one child will live to care for them in their old age.

In an article in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* for May 22, Frances Lappé and Joseph Collins expose as misleading myths four familiar explanations of world hunger. The first is the claim that people go hungry because their countries have limited agricultural resources:

> The very countries that most of us think of as food-deficient and import-dependent are themselves major agricultural exporters. Forty per cent of all agricultural imports into the United States, itself one of the world's top agricultural importers, come from countries of supposed scarcity. . . .

> And what of land scarcity? Several authoritative studies agree that only 44 per cent of the world's cultivable land is actually being cropped. Many landowners who hold land as an investment, not as a source of their food, leave vast amounts unplanted. In Colombia the largest landowners, in control of 70 per cent of the agricultural land, planted only 6 per cent in 1960. But it was in assessing *what* is grown that we came to understand the true magnitude of the waste of land needed by hungry people. In Central American and Caribbean countries, where as many as 70 per cent of the children are under-nourished, at least half the agricultural land, often the best land, is used to produce crops for export, not food for the local people.

So scarcity—*natural* scarcity—is not the issue. The land is there, the hungry people are there to work it, but they lack access to the land. Given access, they would find ways to grow enough to eat. In China, these writers point out, where there are 80 per cent more people per arable acre than in India, no one starves. And China was once called the "land of famine." Nor is the answer "more production" of the sort now going on, but rather the right kind of production for local consumption, using labor-intensive methods. It is a fallacy, moreover, to assert that developing countries need to export luxury products like cocoa, tea, and sugar in order to get foreign exchange:

> Even when part of the foreign exchange earned is used to import food, it is generally not the needed staples but items to satisfy the tastes of the better-off urban classes. In Senegal, the choice land is used to grow peanuts and vegetables for export to Europe. Much of the foreign exchange earned is used to import wheat for foreign-owned mills that turn out flour for French-style bread for the urban-dwellers. Indeed, the very success of export agriculture can further undermine the welfare of the poor. When world commodity prices go up, self-provisioning farmers may be pushed off the land by cash crop producers seeking to profit on the higher commodity prices.

The poor in the under-developed countries are linked by a common need with the rural poor in America:

> The very process of increasing concentration of control over the land and all other productive resources that we have identified as a direct cause of hunger in under-developed countries is going on right here at home. Only 5.5 per cent of all farms in the United States have come to operate over one-half of all land in farms. The resulting landlessness and joblessness in rural America are at the root of much of the persistent hunger in the midst of agricultural bounty. In food manufacturing, the top four firms in any given food line control, on the average, over half the market. In 1972, the Federal Trade Commission staff calculated that such oligopolies in 13 food lines cost consumers $2.1 billion in overcharges. For the 1 out of ten Americans who must spend 69 per cent of all income on food, such inflated prices mean malnutrition. . . . "Interdependence" in a world of

extreme power inequalities becomes a smokescreen for the usurpation of food resources by the few for the few.

A woman who has been farming in Maine for the past eight years says in the *Maine Land Advocate* (May-June):

> It is important that we all understand the massive changes which have resulted from the government's farm policies in the last twenty years. In the early 1950s the Department of Agriculture designed an agricultural subsidy and taxation program which it openly admitted was for the purpose of "eliminating them (farmers with gross sales of $10,000 or less in 1953) from agriculture and to shift them and their children into non-farm employment . . . in other words, push them into cities." . . . The effect of these policies has been just that. In less than twenty years, 22 million people have been forced to give up their tenant farms or sell their own farms to corporate agribusiness and become urban laborers. There is very little food being produced by "farmers" today; your turkeys come from Greyhound, hams from ITT, lettuce from Dow Chemical, potatoes from Boeing, strawberries from Purex and vegetables from Tenneco—most of this, of course, courtesy of the underpaid labor of farm workers. . . .

> Two generations ago this country was called a "nation of farmers." We are now a nation of dispossessed and oppressed urban workers. We need to save every independent farm that still exists and bring back tens of thousands more. What this means for those of us living in the country is that our food production skills are needed by the rest of the people in this society. . . . The country also offers nearly unique opportunities for working for change and building new institutions within our local communities. Because of the low population density in rural areas, each of us has a much more visible and direct impact on what happens in our lives and in our communities.

We'd planned to note a few good things, but our space is gone.