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BEHIND SOCRATIC IGNORANCE

THE debt of the modern world to Socrates can hardly be measured. To attempt it, at any rate, would involve us in needless controversy. What we should like to do, initially, is to take cognizance of but one of his gifts to posterity—his shaping, through his life, his trial, his death, of the idea of public blessedness.

Insofar as the societies of Western civilization have a "spiritual" ideal, it is embodied in the figure of Socrates. He was a man who insisted upon the right of every man to think for himself, and on the need of the social community to leave open all undecided questions. He declared, you could say, for the negative principle that no organized community can justly lend its authority to pretended truths, arguing the right of the individual to examine all assertions and to expose the errors of those he finds to be false.

The agora, for Socrates, was the market place of ideas. Here, he said, any man may come and take part in the exchange. And the exchange must be *free,* since only with complete freedom can the worth of ideas be examined without fear of consequences, and such truth as it is possible to know be made available to those who seek.

Now this, we may say, is indeed the modern conception of public blessedness. It is the *sine qua non of* the democratic society. It is the tap root of our theory of political good and it has obvious application to the ideal of public education. It is also essential, the scientists say, to the practice of their disciplines. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that no truly human pursuit can be carried on, in society, without the latitude in thought and action provided by this principle.

But if we are called upon to explain why, with this great principle to guide us, we have not been able to bring a better society into being, what shall we say?

The simplest, most obvious reply is that not enough men care about the pursuit of truth as Socrates did. His kind of public blessedness—and ours—needs to be valued and *used* if it is to survive. The freedom of thought Socrates died to vindicate is not blessed at all for men with partisan doctrines to defend, nor is it of more than accidental or expedient use to those concerned with the pursuit of things, or of power. So public blessedness of the Socratic sort cannot survive conditions which Socrates would have identified as private damnation—constituted of indifference to truth, partisan passions, and acquisitive appetites.

It is an old question, this: Freedom, yes, but freedom for what?

The worship of Freedom, we say, is an ennobling one, but then we must add that this Goddess cannot be beguiled into the service of ignominious ends.

What ends are worthy of our freedom? It is here, with the asking of this question, that our public philosophy weakens, for it cannot make an answer without breaking the Socratic rule. Or, we could say that the philosophy does not weaken, but that we misuse it, since it is not the business of public philosophy to answer this question. The genius of public philosophy lies in its negative truth.

What can we do, publicly, to help this situation? One would think that we can do very little more than to expose the mistake of hoping or expecting that the public philosophy can solve this problem. But even this would accomplish a great deal. It would be a better undertaking, for example, than the appointment of some semi-official body to make dry determinations about

"goals for America." For all that such a body could do would be to reach conclusions so generalized that they are no help at all.

Well, what other means have we for getting at this problem? We could say to ourselves that Socrates is honored not only in our political arrangements and ideals, but also in our cultural tradition. The Florentine Revival of Learning was in direct line of descent from the Socratic-Platonic Schools, and the Liberal-Humanist conceptions of human rights and responsibilities are a part of the same inheritance. You could say that this tradition involves the ideal of individual pursuit of the Good according to Socratic maxims of free inquiry, to which was added, in the course of centuries, the resourcefulness and pertinacity of scientific method and the skepticism of the eighteenth-century's rejection of dogma and superstition.

We must ask the Humanists what they think about the matter. It happens that an article by Colin Wilson, which first appeared in the British *Humanist* for April, 1965, and was reprinted in the American *Humanist* for July/August, amounts to a direct attack on this question. Mr. Wilson begins by proposing that the words of his title, "A Humanist Religion?", instead of conveying a paradoxical abstraction, "represent one of the greatest problems of our time." His first point—and a main one—is that Humanism, as a philosophy, fails to provide the drive and commitment which have characterized the protagonists of religion. His argument, here, is based upon material of the sort used by Archibald MacLeish in his famous article, "The Irresponsibles," in the *Nation* for May 18, 1941, and by Edwin Grant Conklin, a biologist, who said in his retiring address as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1937:

> In spite of a few notable exceptions it must be confessed that scientists did not win the freedom they have generally enjoyed, and they have not been conspicuous in defending this freedom when it has been threatened. Perhaps they have lacked that confidence in absolute truth and that emotional exaltation that have led martyrs and heroes to welcome persecution and death in defense of their faith. Today as in former times it is the religious leaders who are most courageous in resisting tyranny. It was not science but religion and ethics that led Socrates to say to his accusers, "I will obey the god rather than you." It was not science but religious conviction that led Milton to utter his noble defense of intellectual liberty, "Whoever knew truth put to the worst in a free and open encounter. . . ." The spirit of science does not cultivate such heroism in the maintenance of freedom. . . .

Colin Wilson offers comment along these lines, but in a different framework. He is not so much concerned with the failure of the modern temper in relation to historical crisis, but, more basically, in terms of human passivity in everyday life. He begins with this comparison:

> T. S. Eliot expressed his objection to humanism by describing it as "a snack at the bar." This, I think, states the problem fairly. When we think of what religion has meant *at its best*—the immense drive and conviction, the cultural breadth, the sense of a "new deal" for human beings, beyond the boring everyday reality in which most of us are confined—I think we must agree that classical humanism seems, in comparison, rather colorless and thin-blooded.

Mr. Wilson concedes that considerable resources have been added to humanism by men like Julian Huxley and Teilhard de Chardin, but wonders what you do when you put down their books: "Join the British Humanist Association?"

Wilson gives sharper outline to the problem by pursuing three clues. First there is what he calls "The St. Neot margin"—"a margin or threshold in the human mind that can be stimulated by pain or inconvenience but not by pleasure." (St. Neot was the place where he thought of this.) Another kind of arousal to purpose is found in art:

> Through art, man learned that the pleasures of the mind are completely different from any of the pleasures the body can provide. *They are of a different order and a superior intensity.* Unfortunately, they are also more short-lived than those of the body. Men cannot sustain these states of insight and intensity for long. H. G. Wells expressed

> the problem graphically when he said that man is like an amphibian that wants to become a land animal, but at present possesses only flippers, so that a short period on land exhausts him. When man makes that evolutionary leap, he will have ceased to be animal, and become truly human.

The third base of Mr. Wilson's statement in this article is not concerned with provocatives to "purpose," but is a brief summary of recent thinking about the nature of man, beginning with Husserl's phenomenological revolution. It traces the emancipation of man from mechanistic and behavioristic definitions through the thought of Merleau-Ponty, Michael Polanyi, and the ever-increasing influence of existential psychologists. Mr. Wilson concludes:

> . . . the methods established by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and some of the basic principles of existential psychology and Polanyi's personalism, have provided a weapon by which it is at last possible to make a direct attack on the St. Neot margin—that is, of human consciousness. This problem, which faces every one of us every day of our lives, to some extent, is the problem of the variability of our capacity for freedom, of our sense of purpose and potentiality under crisis, which gives way to boredom and drifting when the crisis is past. Everyday events seem to induce everyday consciousness by a hypnotic process, and yet we have a deep sense of being *free,* but somehow without the key to our freedom.
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> In writing this I am aware of the hopelessness of trying to explain a problem of this size in a short article. But I think that what I have said has made one point clear. Humanism does not yet really exist. At present it is a mere fumbling, a compromise, an instinctive desire without knowledge or consciousness. If it could emerge out of this chrysalis stage, the "crisis of modern civilization" about which we are always reading would be conclusively solved. We would discover, I think, that humanism is a more powerful unifying principle than the most sanguine humanists have so far dared to believe.

The immediate value of this conclusion is that it puts a timeless question back into time—*our* time—showing that modern man is under some kind of historical necessity to find, or unceasingly to seek, an answer. It implies that the logics which have enabled us to ignore this question of uniquely human purpose have broken down. We no longer have rational excuse for ignoring it. Recognizing this, you could say, is a cultural achievement. While individual men do indeed seek and sometimes find the truth, when the evolution of thought of many men reaches a point of crucial confrontation, the term "epoch" takes on full significance and the men of the time have opportunity to consider their lives in the light of a common sense of destiny.

What is needed, says Mr. Wilson, expressing his sense of this destiny, "is an attack on this question of immediate purpose." He states some of his conclusions, inviting his humanist readers "to see whether they can devise a better system of attack."

Other words, of course, than "immediate purpose" could be used. There are various ways of speaking of the crisis of the present. We prefer Mr. Wilson's because it has a generality sufficient to cover the essential meanings of most of the other ways, and because of its sharp specificity in relation to the question asked earlier: *Freedom for what?*

Asking about immediate purpose is asking what lies behind Socratic ignorance. We may ask this question for ourselves, as hungering individuals, or we may ask it *in behalf* of the social community, hoping to discover the missing element in the common life which, if supplied, would sustain the public blessedness of our political acceptance of Socratic Ignorance. What we cannot do is ask it *as* the political community. Immediate purpose is a temper in human life, not a corporate holding of social organization. It may become a blessed insinuation which pervades the atmosphere of the *polis,* but it cannot be ordered to appear by some high-ranking drill sergeant, nor jealously watched over by the FBI.

We need now to examine Socrates with a gimlet eye. We soon find that this self-styled ignoramus was a man of immeasurable good fortune. That is, he knew exactly what he wanted, and what he wanted to do—which was what he

did, every day of his life. What did he mean, then, when he spoke of his "ignorance"? He meant, you could say, that he was after unmistakable truths about the good of man, and would settle for nothing less, but had realized that truths of this order are not communicable as solutions of simple linear problems. (He couldn't have programmed his questions for a computer.) To get at those truths, he found, each man has to add his own incommensurable factor, and not all men are ready, willing, or able to do this. To help in communication, perhaps, he called his own incommensurable factor his *daemon*, but it might have had other names, or no name at all. Nonetheless, Socrates had the air of a man who had made some progress in the discovery of incommensurable truth. What was that air? Well, he had extraordinary intensity of conviction—he gave his life for it—and he loved freedom as a sacred thing. So we may say—assuming that Socrates did indeed find some truth—that the truths he discovered were totally compatible with freedom. Now freedom is a value, and truths are in some sense facts—at least, they have a factual dimension. But in this case they must also be facts which participate in value and depend upon value. This, then, is the order of the truths discovered by Socrates, which lay behind his Socratic ignorance.

Can we say anything more about this knowledge which belonged to Socrates? Well, you could say that he became very careful when the dialectic launched him on eschatological flights. When he got too far away from matters which allow rational or immediate intuitive verification, and wanted at the same time to make communications which had a factual aspect—such as his views concerning the state of the soul after death, or before birth—he lapsed into myth. This is both the glory and the limitation of the myth—what it gives with one hand (insight into the transcendental) it takes away with the other (understanding myths literally or "factually" makes them false). "Facts," for Socrates, were of no importance save as analogues of values and intimations of transcendent meaning. Socrates' claim of ignorance, then, embodied the natural humility of a man who knew his limitations, but it also embodied his declaration that communicable facts are never more than analogues of transcendental realities; and since he believed, as a teacher, that individual human limitations might eventually be overcome, the case for public blessedness in agnostic uncertainty rests upon the incommunicability of final truth by means of the analogues which are available to human beings for public use.

What do you do, then, if you love the *polis?* You do what Socrates did—haunt the agora asking questions of your fellow men about justice, which is not so very different, after all, from "immediate purpose." Or you form an Academy of persons committed to the Socratic quest.

This is the position arrived at by Colin Wilson in his *Humanist* article. What is his reception by the humanists?

Ten men, no doubt all with distinguishing achievements to their credit, comment on Wilson's views. Their reactions range all the way from measured agreement with what he says to contemptuous dismissal. One man says that only "a casual association with humanism should convince one of the validity of Wilson's point. . . . When man lacks a sense of purpose, he becomes involved with many irrelevant problems—the size of his wardrobe, age of his car, comfort, avoidance of pain, etc." A critic remarks that "Colin Wilson seems mainly to long for the emotional jag that characterizes the religious convert," and another asks, "What can possibly be gained by trying to plug the round hole of human ignorance with the square peg of human fantasy?" A supporter proposes: "We [humanists] must be willing to admit that humanism and the meaning of human life cannot be expressed or given meaning in the terminology of logical positivism, which seems to be the aim of many naturalistic humanists." An objector thinks that "Wilson appears to be duped, drugged, or hypnotized

about some consuming purpose of the early-Christian variety," adding, "I find we have nothing to learn from early Christianity." Another critic agrees that "humanism does not yet exist," meaning, however, that "it does not exist to provide the kind of haven which he [Wilson] is seeking." This commentator thinks humanists should pursue "detailed, rational, and reasonable analysis of values in a rigorous and objective manner," and then move to "specific definition of our individual and organizational goals—short-term, intermediate, and long-range." A therapist or counselor believes that Wilson finds lack of purpose in humanism mainly because "humanists tend to work alone," with the result that "there are no major goals which can be fully shared by a large group on an emotional basis." Moreover, he says, "a mass emotional movement is inconsistent with humanism." The final contributor strikes out on his own:

> Whether Colin Wilson is on the right track on this theme is not my present concern. A thought I have entertained for the last twenty-four hours is that perhaps our trouble stems from our determination to be explicit at all costs. As poets are well aware, some things can be more forcefully expressed implicitly and indirectly. I don't really hold out much hope for my thought; I don't think it will stand much close scrutiny. It is—what a shameful adjective—a reactionary thought. . . . Is humanism merely the name we give to the process of freeing the mind from religious channels? When the process is completed no section of thought or action is set aside as being religious. Is this what it's all about?

What can be said about these comments? Well, allowing yourself a little Olympian presumption, you could say that the question of purpose is up for grabs, depending upon where one's temperamental inclinations place him along the line which stretches from Aristotelian sobriety and respect for "facts" to Platonic ardor and transcendental imagining. The comments show that humanists need to give some serious attention to the effect on thought of the egocentric predicament: what is for one no more than a failure of nerve becomes for another a clear call to existential discovery. There are also some lessons in the art of communication, or rather signs that people often prefer to hear what they want to hear, in order to solidify their own views. No doubt the comments are marked by a splendid diversity, although with some tendency to avoid Mr. Wilson's challenge, for the reason that its meaning and importance are not *felt;* or if felt, regarded with suspicion.

Another way of putting this would be to say that these comments attempt to measure the chances that will have to be taken in trying to find out what lies behind Socratic ignorance. Some say, with reason, that we can look for an answer individually but not corporately. Some say it doesn't matter, since only the emotionalism which Humanism has fought for lo these many centuries will be found there. Naturally enough, the *caveats* are many, the ardent responses few, and these tempered by prudential considerations. Yet the poet's daring finds a shy champion, on the ground that if some kind of truth should lie behind the barrier, and if it can be spoken, it ought to be spoken well. This view was more formally expressed by Frederick Lange (in his *History of Materialism*):

> Zeller recognizes, quite rightly, that the Platonic myths are not the mere garments of thoughts which the philosopher possessed in another shape, but that they are employed in those cases where Plato wishes to express something which he has no means of conveying in rigorous scientific form. It is wrong, however, to regard this as a weakness in the philosopher, . . . It lies rather in the nature of the problems on which Plato has here ventured, that they cannot be treated in any but a figurative method. An adequate scientific knowledge of the absolutely transcendental is impossible, and modern systems which call up the phantom of an intellectual knowledge of transcendental things, are in truth no whit higher in this respect than the Platonic.

Well, we can say, then, that what lies behind Socratic ignorance is an eager and persistent engagement with such problems. To venture here seems to some a participation in obsequies for the Scientific Method. To others, it is like an invitation to the frightening insecurity of the Siege

Perilous. As one who bids for companions in this foray into the Unknown, Mr. Wilson is sure to be charged with audacity, if not something worse. But there are also those who will recognize in him a Pied Piper whose warnings deserve attention. In any event, the clarity of his reasoning and the impartiality of his argument set him free of any of the stereotypes of critics who have in the past used him as some kind of precious convenience for the practice of their trade. *Beyond the Outsider* is one of the books which give crucial insights into the age in which we live, and adds, thereby, a substantial impetus to change. For the point, here, is that Wilson assembles evidence of the growing consensus that human beings can no longer justify their refusal to look behind Socratic Ignorance. The world can no longer survive in culturally sanctioned neglect of the individual quest for immediate purpose. The sign-posts marked "Reliable Knowledge" must be pointed in another direction. The Academy must be revived and the agora again occupied by fearless questioners. And these questioners will press, not "answers," but the ultimate importance of the quest.

What is this importance? The reply comes from all quarters. Human beings cannot live as human beings should without commitment. And their societies, when left unnourished by individual aspiration, are driven to the narcotizing sludge of the purveyors of manufactured faiths. Who can deny that these symptoms are at hand?

REVIEW
SEARCH FOR AN AUTHENTIC ETHIC

A NEW edition of Viktor Frankl's *The Doctor and the Soul* (Knopf, 1965) traces the author's progressive discoveries concerning the need for a radical psychological approach to "moral values." Authentic morality, for Dr. Frankl, is of necessity existential—that is, it must involve creative affirmation and commitment to an ideal, not *because* of rewards to be gained in the future, nor to avoid punishment, but because of their intrinsic worth in "the here and now." Nietzsche wrote that "whoever has a reason for living endures almost any mode of life," which is a way of saying that it is within the power of the individual to establish what is truth and virtue for him, despite his apparent encapsulation by external circumstances he cannot control.

In Dr. Frankl's opinion, no man draws on his moral potential until he has discovered a "task" in life and tested the genuineness of this destiny against both objective difficulties and subjective troubles:

> Having such a task makes the person irreplaceable and gives his life the value of uniqueness. The sentence of Nietzsche's quoted above suggests that the "mode" of life—that is, its characteristic hardships and ennuis—retreats to the background the moment that, and to the extent that, the reasons for life come to the fore.
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> But not only this. In view of the task quality of life, it logically follows that life becomes all the more meaningful the more difficult it gets. A natural analogy is the attitude of the true athlete. The athlete sets up his problem in such a way that he may prove himself by its conquest. Consider a hurdle race, or the practice of establishing handicaps in a race. Shall we not also test our mettle and grow in courage and strength through the difficulties in ordinary life?

This is one way of denying the prime importance of "the pleasure principle," and, indeed, it is evident that an affirmative psychology which promises "self-actualization" must minimize the importance of pleasure as a goal. For instance, an article by William Lynch in the *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* (Fall, 1964) speaks of the need for probing the "metaphysics of wishing." In Dr. Frankl's terms, this is simply to say that wishing is of two sorts: one rooted in egocentric desire, and classifiable as merely "psychic"; the other rooted in longing for the sort of truth and value which commands *subordination* of pleasure. The authentic, uniquely human "wish" originates in a dimension of mind which the Greeks might have called *noëtic,* a term provocatively employed by Dr. Frankl. Mr. Lynch uses a more familiar terminology to distinguish between a "genuine wish" and a merely "willful" orientation:

> To the degree that a person really wishes, it is he that is acting—he is not being acted on. He is setting himself in a choosing, wanting position toward reality, and toward this part of reality rather than that. Thus he wants to be a doctor, or to go to a movie, or to take a walk, to sit, to stand, on occasions to do nothing. He sets his heart on one goal and not another. The wishing of a lifetime is both organized and multifarious. What I am emphasizing is that it is the most active, the most human, the most defining part of a man.
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> It is clear that the wilful act is absolute in an altogether different sense and is in relationship in an altogether different way.
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> It is absolute indeed, or trying to be. One of its goals, I take it, is to wish and to act without reason, or contrary to reason. It does not wish to act in relationship to reality and, therefore, is trying to act without imagination. I will something precisely because there is no sense to it. In this sense the willful act is full of will and nothing else. It refuses to imagine.
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> It is indeed in relationship, but in an altogether different way than is the act of wishing. It is in relation contra. It chooses a thing because it is against. Where the act of wishing established a firm relationship and can then be said to be free in it, and to be free of it, the willful act remains preoccupied with the relationship and is always in its presence. It is always striking back and it would never will anything if it should not accomplish this objective. There would be no joy in life if it were not spiting someone. Therefore, it is never simply in its own simple presence, never in the possession of its own soul or wishes. And it may be repeated: though

thoroughly without imagination, because not interested in the object of its wishing for its own sake, it is full of endless fantasy, all of it hostile. In my sense of the word it may be said not to wish at all.

The rediscovery of an ancient truth—that the embodiment of the highest morality does not consist in adopting a "standard," but in finding one's own integrity—is reflected in current fiction. For example, Stephen Becker's paperback morality story, *Juice*, ends with a prominent man's refusal to use his influence to escape responsibility for a death in an automobile accident. Becker's protagonist worries through an attempt to communicate the essence of integrity and ethics to his two children:

"I was careless," Joe said. "And it was a kind of carelessness that you can't buy back. So I couldn't very well blame it on somebody else. Not even on the . . ."

"The dead man," Dave said.

"Yes. Most of all, not on him. It would have been the worst kind of cheating." His voice sounded tired and unconvincing. "We all do a little cheating all the time. We don't tell other people everything we think, or we're nice to people we don't like, or we pretend to be a little better than we are. That's all right. But I can't do the other kind. . . . Do you understand so far?"

"Good. Now it would have been easier to cheat. But I couldn't go against myself. I knew it would make trouble for everybody, and I tried to fix as much of that trouble as I could. But the most important thing must have been to believe—to do—" he paused, and groped—"to do what I would still think right twenty years from now. Not to do what was best for now, unless it was also best for then. All right? Because I don't want to stop being me. I don't want to become somebody else."

"All right," Dave said.

"So I had to tell them it was my fault," he said gently, "and when they sing those songs in school (derogatory doggerel naming him a "killer"], they're partly right."

Dave looked up compassionately, "Then what do I do?"

"You take it," Joe said, still gently. "You can't do anything else."

"It isn't fair." Dave said.

"No, but it's true. You'll have to go through a hard time because of what I did. Only for a little while; they'll forget about it. But you won't like it. I want you to do it well," he said. "For me. I'll feel bad about it too, you know. But maybe then if other hard times come, when you're bigger, you'll remember how to get through them." . . "Yes. It's hard to know what's right. And even if your father knows—or thinks he knows, my father did—that doesn't mean that you'll know. It isn't passed on automatically like red hair or brown eyes. You have to do it yourself. You can't take anybody else's word for it." What terrible nonsense Joe thought; and I believe it, and always, in every generation somebody's believed it, and told his children about it.

"Not even yours?"

"No," Joe said. "If you think I'm wrong—or somebody is—and it feels important, you have to say so." He paused. "There's no halfway." Dangerous, he thought; too late now. "You have to decide what you think is right. Nobody can decide for you; no one man, and no group of men. And if you take it upon yourself to decide that, if you accept that responsibility, the most terrible of all responsibilities, then you have to *do* what's right, and if it turns out badly you can't blame it on anyone else. That isn't so hard when it makes trouble for you alone; but even when it makes trouble for other people, people you love, you have to do it." It sounds wrong, he thought, frightened. How can I tell him that? Can he live by that? Should he? "If they love you," he said, "they won't mind the trouble so much."

COMMENTARY
THE CLARITY OF WHOLENESS

THE charges brought against Colin Wilson (see pages 7 and 8) by his humanist critics are not really dissimilar in principle to the frequent objections to Plato's mixture of poetry with the dialectic. Lange argues that Plato ought to have remained only a poet:

> Plato's philosophy might indeed, if this artistic element had been carried out, have become the best model for the speculation of all time, but the combination of this element with the abstract dialectic, and logical severity, so sharply emphasized by Lewes, produces a heterogeneous whole, and especially by its total confusion of science and poetry created great confusion in later philosophy.

This comment may have seemed valid in the nineteenth century (Lange's work first appeared in 1865), but we know, now, what happens when the poetic element (involving subjectivity and value) is wholly divorced from science: You get the denial of meaning which characterizes Logical Positivism, and you get Mechanism and Determinism as the basis of scientific theories of man and nature.

It is at least arguable, today, that there is more genuine philosophy in recent works of literature—poetry, drama, essays—than in the total body of technically "philosophical" works. In defense of Plato, you could say that life itself is filled with subtle unions of fact, reason, and value, and that their combination in human experience is more truly represented in poetic works than in any other form of human expression. To take these elements apart and to analyze them may be a useful exercise, but can it be termed "philosophy"? That is, does taking them apart cause, in the long run, even more confusion, by delighting men with the misleading clarity such analysis supplies? Separation of fact and value, you could argue, creates the kind of dilemma suffered by the thoughtful men of today, who are tortured by the need to get the subject, and values, *back into* serious investigations of the nature of things. Conceivably, Plato was a philosopher who refused to take them out.

The specious clarity of scientific abstractions has been the ruin of modern man's thinking about himself. Any effort to restore wholeness to thought, as well as wholeness to man, is sure to present difficulties; among other things, we are going to have to do without the certainties of our precious over-simplifications, and get used to feeling "lost" for a while, until better principles of order are discovered and put to work.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

CAN STUDENTS PICK TEACHERS?

AN excellent opening text for John Fischer's *Harper's* (February) editorial, "Is There a Teacher on the Faculty?" (condensed in the June *Reader's Digest*), is provided by a few candid sentences from a Carnegie Foundation Report titled "The Flight from Teaching":

> The able researcher, through publication, gains a national reputation. But the able teacher is rarely known, as a teacher, beyond his own college or university. Good teaching is not only a relatively private performance, but it resists measurement. . . .
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> The college teacher shortage will never be solved without an intensive and thoroughgoing effort to re-establish the status of teaching. . . . As a rule the university administration is so busy struggling to maintain the strength of its huge graduate and professional schools that it neglects the undergraduate. And so does the faculty.

There are two possible modes of reorientation for administrators and professors toward teaching as meaningful communication. The first would be for a daring board of trustees or a teacher-minded administration to make a sharp break with tradition and employ (1) professors who love to teach, (2) others who want to combine research and teaching, and (3) still others for research alone. But even with this program, it would be necessary to evoke student evaluations of "successful teaching." Mr. Fischer is primarily concerned with recognition of the need for student appraisal. He points out that the groundwork has been laid m contemporary undergraduate publications:

> At a few universities—notably Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley—the undergraduates publish their own guides to courses and teachers. Both of these publications are based on questionnaires, filled out confidentially by students enrolled during the previous semester in each of the courses listed. The answers are then tabulated and evaluated, at Berkeley by upper-division and graduate students in the respective departments, at Harvard by the editors of *The Crim*son. It is my impression that both sets of evaluators try hard to be fair, ignoring the comments of soreheads and grudge-nursers. When the evidence is scanty or contradictory, the ratings tend to be cautious; when it is ample, they are brutally candid.
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> The last issue of the Berkeley *Slate*, for instance, described an English instructor as "one of the brilliant young men who shore up the department; he is a most intelligent and articulate person, easily accessible and very pleasant." In an adjoining paragraph, another man's lectures were reported as "dull, pedantic, and largely irrelevant. Although apparently a technician and a scholar, he is like a used-car salesman selling Tolstoi to a customer he is sure won't buy." Nor are the editors overawed by academic fame. *The Crimson's* thirty-ninth edition of its "Confidential Guide" remarked of the prestigious Dr. Jerome Bruner—whose work was discussed in the December *Harper's*—that he was well-liked, but not as a lecturer, because his lectures were poorly organized and "incoherent." It was even rougher on Dr. J. Kenneth Galbraith, economic polemicist, Presidential adviser, and recent Ambassador to India.
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> Obviously, this sort of thing is bound to cause a certain amount of anguish among the faculty. One former teacher (a very good one) told me she could never bear to work on a campus where her performance was thus held up to public scrutiny. But writers, actors, painters, chefs, and automobile manufacturers also suffer when they read reviews of their work—think how the designers of the Edsel must have felt—and yet they somehow continue to operate. Sometimes they even profit from such criticism. Why, then, should teaching be the only important function in our society which is not subject either to criticism or to the appraisal of the market?

It is not so much that "criticism" is needed; much more important is appreciative evaluation—which only the more thoughtful and knowledgeable students can provide. We agree with Mr. Fischer that students are usually interested in whether or not they "like" their teachers, and are willing to wait before deciding how much knowledge the teacher has in relation to his field. The point, here, is that American democratic education ought not to be ruled by popular taste, as reflected in "the market," *i.e.*, by what can be "sold." Ideally, representative democracy opens participatory channels for any

man who makes himself articulate and whose ideals lead him to affirmative positions. From this point of view, the teacher-evaluations of students should bring the attention of conscientious administrators to inherent worth—and ample time for reviewing them would be more desirable than a circulation of questionnaires.

Mr. Fischer is much taken by the approach pioneered by Swarthmore College. There the final examinations for honors courses are conducted by professors invited from other campuses, usually distinguished authorities in their fields. This procedure tends to free estimates of teaching ability from possible administration bias, giving, instead, independent evidence of what has been happening in class. Further, both teachers and students find themselves cooperatively working for common ends—the successful meeting of a dispassionate test of comprehension, given by men whom neither instructor nor pupils are likely to know personally. Swarthmore apparently has an extremely high reputation for good teaching, and this plan has been adopted by other liberal arts colleges, although not yet by any large university.

The usual reason given for a university's unwillingness to try the plan is the considerable expense involved. It is true enough that bringing in outside examiners costs a lot of money, but, as Mr. Fischer points out, it is hard to imagine a better investment, if "good teaching" criteria are to be separated from proficiency in research and from techniques of securing publication in professional journals.

Most "successful" teaching occurs, no doubt, when the student is encouraged to forget about grades and credits—status considerations. Then examinations can be taken in stride, even be fun, if regarded as an opportunity to organize the results of study and reflection. J. R. Kidd tells in *How Adults Learn* of a group of school superintendents who took part in a month-long workshop. At the beginning, it was not known whether formal credit would be allowed, and during this initial period it was apparent that the men worked with enthusiasm, diligently studying subject areas which they selected themselves. Subsequently, when the Department of Education announced that credit *would* be given, a noticeable change took place. Dr. Kidd reports that "class members began to ask what the *instructor thought* was important and what the instructor said should be studied. The professor directing the workshop claims that tensions increased and that satisfaction and deep application diminished in the second period."

A great deal may be learned in the comparatively free atmosphere of "Adult Education" about humanizing the conventional university approach. As Dr. Kidd puts it, the most important factor in a viable scale of evaluation must be "based on the feelings and judgments that the learner has about the experience in which he has just participated." He adds:

> The *agent* of evaluation may be very important. If the learning objective is simply reproducing what the teacher has taught, the result may just as well be measured by the teacher. But if a primary learning objective is for the learner to become increasingly autonomous, to begin to take over direction of his own learning, then it is highly important that he take a large share, if not the complete control, of the evaluation.

FRONTIERS

A Gentle Profanity

THE General was tired. He lowered himself clumsily into a canvas lounging chair and closed his eyes. It was a long campaign. Then he snorted to himself, "Campaign!" Modern war no longer had "campaigns." Campaigns were like plays at the theatre. They had beginnings, long-drawn-out second acts, then the triumph, or an honorable defeat. But now, instead of campaigns, there were endless intervals of nervous waiting while the civilian commanders played their games of psychological chess. Then, suddenly, the machines were activated and death rained on some portion of the globe. The warring powers exchanged "samples" of their new techniques of destructiveness and slaughter, hoping to paralyze the enemy with fear. But sometimes these samples took as many lives as an entire war had consumed in earlier periods. And the preparation and waiting were certainly more costly.

So the General was not only tired. He was sick of his profession and beginning to hate the irrational factors which controlled his life. He opened his eyes to the dim but harsh unshaded light in the bunker. Then he saw a man lying on the other canvas lounge. He sat up and said gruffly, "Who are you?"

The man sat up also, but with a more leisurely motion. He looked at the General. He was about the same size, with graying hair, and seemed about fifty, the same age as the General. He wore civilian clothes. "Isn't it time you put a stop to it?" he said.

The General called out to his aide in the next compartment. "Walters!" The young lieutenant burst into the room. "Take this man to the stockade! How did he get in here?" Walters stepped toward the visitor, who was now standing, looking at him. As he moved the stranger pointed at him, and something passed from his hand and "flew" at Walters, who slumped into unconsciousness. The stranger eased him to the floor, then draped him on one of the lounges. "That's no use," he said, turning back to the General.

The General stared at Walters. "What have you done to him?" he asked. *"Who are you?"*

Ignoring the second question, the stranger said, "Oh, I just pinked him with one of my darts. He'll be all right. It was set for fifteen minutes. That's all I can spend with you. And he won't really remember what happened. Now we can talk."

The General thought of calling for another aide, but a look at his visitor changed his mind. "What do you want?"

"I want you to stop this war," the stranger said. It took the General a while to get used to the idea that there wasn't much he could do except meet this visitor on his own terms. Finally he said, "You're asking something ridiculous, you know. I don't make my country's policy. I just carry it out when military action is involved."

"You're a more influential man than you think," said the stranger. "If you were to resign your commission and go home and tell the people some of the things you were thinking before you found me here, it would have an extraordinary effect."

"You mean *stand alone,"* asked the General, "against the *entire country?"* He was honestly incredulous.

"Well," said the stranger, "that isn't what I meant, but I guess you have to put it that way. It's true enough that nothing really important ever happens except when people begin to stand alone."

He chuckled. "I could do it for you, of course. I've got enough darts, and I can set them for any time-cycle. Do you think a hundred years would be long enough to put all the soldiers to sleep? I have some friends that would help me, too."

The General was horrified. "My God," he said. "You wouldn't do that."

The stranger sobered up. "No," he said. "I wouldn't really do that. If I did, it would be my peace, not yours. I don't need any peace. I made my own a long time ago. So that wouldn't work. Still, it's an idea you ought to think about. I may not be able to stay around here, and there are others who still believe they can do things like that. You may find them troublesome—you know, people telling you how to live at peace, and making you do it, whether you want to or not. And that's when you'll *have* to stand alone, whether you like it or not . . . or just give in."

"But—"

"Think about it," said the stranger. "You went to school. You know as well as I do that power doesn't last forever. Furthermore, you don't really like the power you're using right now. You don't think it's doing any good. *Why are you using it?"*

"My God," said the General.

"I know Him," said the stranger. "He's a friend of mine. Like to meet Him? . . . Don't worry. He's not quite what you think."

The fact is, another Person was already in the bunker. "Hi Prote," said the stranger. He explained to the General: "We call him 'Prote,' short for Proteus, because he's always changing shape."

"Yes," said Proteus sadly, "I got pretty worried a few years ago, when it began to seem that I would have to wear a patch over one eye. Those damn shirts!"

Things were going too fast for the General. "How do you mean?" he asked.

"It's this way," Proteus explained. "I'm the power outside of man himself, in which so many people believe. So when they change their beliefs, I have to change, too. Of course, I have a *real* self, too, just as you do, but it's nothing to do with religion. That's *my* business. You see, my consolidated image is made by human thinking about 'me,' or what people really believe in, and when the focus of their thought changes, I have to change, too. I was pretty churchy for a long while—kind of like an all-wise Dr. Spock for adult anxieties and trials. Nice costume, though, and it wasn't all bad. The mystics learned to leave me alone, even though they usually called me the most extravagant new names while they were finding their way to the *via negativa.* For a while I thought Luther would help, but you know what happened to him. And then came those wonderful Atheists! For the first time in centuries I began to have a little free time. But atheists can get confused and worshipful, too. Imagine my identity problems with Dialectical Materialism! Too many props and surrogate bureaucrats are needed to play a role like that. It was also a little like what the advanced Christians in the thirties got into when they began saying, before they went to bed, 'Oh Principle of Integration!' Why couldn't they just *stop!* Meanwhile, of course, Madison Avenue (please don't use that expression any more than you have to) had been gradually taking over. Have you any idea what it's like to have to get into a Calvert bottle every time some fool wants to feel like a Man of Distinction? Lately, the demands on me have been something awful. No consensus any more—just impulse and wild variety. I have to be all things to all men. And you know, I am not really a 'thing' at all! Of course, people still do those Public Prayers . . . u*gh!"*

The General was feeling embarrassed. "It must be pretty tough," he said. "Did I ever give you a bad time?"

Prote looked at him with a friendly smile, "No," he said. "You don't really take me seriously. Actually, you've got more self-reliance than a lot of people. That's the only reason we bothered to come to see you. People like you will turn me loose, some day, and then I can get on with my own affairs. I have them, you know.

Remember what Epicurus said: 'The Gods exist, but they are not what the *hoi polloi,* the uneducated multitude, suppose them to be'."

The General was puzzled. "You said Gods*!* I thought there was only one God."

"Oh sure," said Proteus. "The One and the Many. That's a problem you have to work out. Meanwhile, we take turns. But you people on earth had better work a little harder. We're getting tired of this nonsense war, and such. And how do you think a God likes being turned inside-out and dressed up differently every other day?"

Proteus looked at the clock. "We have to go, now," he said. "But there's one thought I'll leave with you: *There's a time-limit on all this."* Then Proteus was gone.

The stranger was still there. The General stared at him. "Who *are* you?" he asked again.

"I could tell you," the stranger answered, "but it probably wouldn't help. In fact, this conversation has been pretty one-sided. But then, you're only a General." He turned away, musing, "A long time ago, the Greeks called me Hermes—*courier* to you," he added, turning back. "Anyhow, that was just one of a number of personations, and they're all pretty misleading. Best we can do, I 'spose."

He looked the General in the eye. "I have a more important question," he said. "Who are *you*?"

Then he was gone, too. Walters stirred and sat up. He stretched; "I must have dropped off right here," he said. "Sorry, sir."