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THE ORDEAL OF THINKING

TWO articles in the Winter *American Scholar* deal with this subject. One is an essay by Hugh Trevor-Roper on Thomas More, with particular attention to his *Utopia.* The other is George Kateb's review of the late Hannah Arendt's posthumous *The Life of the Mind.* Both discussions have a Platonic starting-point by reason of More's lifelong devotion to the Greek philosopher and Hannah Arendt's adoption of Socrates as an exemplary thinker. (Socrates taught thinking, not conclusions.)

What are the uses of this inquiry? The question is hard to answer because the uses are so numerous. People who do not think at all do not qualify as human. People who think, as some say, to excess, and therefore to the neglect of action, are ridiculed as mere theorists. Those who think well as technicians are honored and well paid. But, depending on the times, they may also be condemned as narrow specialists. Philosophic thinkers are usually ignored, except by the few; or if for some reason their ideas attain popularity, this is almost always at the cost of inversion or caricature. Thinkers whose skills enable them to feed the appetites and prejudices of the times, or their own, are called rationalizers, and some would argue that all thinking men are rationalizers, by reason of the common egocentric predicament.

Such inspections of mental activity lead to the conclusion that human beings *have* to think, the constitution of their being requires it. No distinctively human enterprise can be undertaken without thinking, whatever else is involved. Yet the question—What does it mean to think well?—has no commonly acceptable answer, doubtless because of other things involved.

Hannah Arendt chooses Socrates for her example of the ideal thinker because he reaches no structural conclusions—he taught no doctrine. The chief product of his endeavors, historically speaking, was apparently perplexity, and when queried about this he gave as the reason that he was himself perplexed. What use was there, then, in learning to think well? Thinking sows doubt, and the better the thinking the stronger the doubt.

Hannah Arendt admired the Socratic way of thinking because, as George Kateb says in his review, Socrates discovered why good thinking "may tend to make the person forbear from terrible evil." This was no casual judgment. Miss Arendt attended and reported the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. It seemed evident to her as she watched the proceedings that Eichmann *could not think.* He lacked even the elementary capacity to evaluate the decisions he made in his life.

Eichmann, she decided, had never had any dialogue with himself. He knew nothing of the Socratic rule that the unexamined life is not worth living. As she says in her book:

> He who does not know the intercourse between me and myself (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to give account of what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can be sure that it will be forgotten the next moment. . . .
>
> For the thinking ego and its experience, conscience, that "fills a man full of obstacles," is a side-effect. And it remains a marginal affair for society at large except in emergencies. . . . At these moments, thinking ceases to be a marginal affair in political matters. When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. . . . If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its

> by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances where I am never alone and always much too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.

This value of thinking—telling right from wrong—is placed above all its other uses. Such awareness is more important than the fruit of all the practical thinking we do: both the how-to variety and the this-is-what-it-is kind of knowledge. Miss Arendt calls Socratic thinking the pursuit of meaning, as distinguished from knowledge, and meaning is all-important because it involves us, our acts of judgment and the intentions of our will depend upon it. Both the technological and the metaphysical products of thinking have obvious limitations, the time-bound relativities of their finite origin, their *ad hoc* genesis, but meaning is some kind of self-knowledge and has a timeless aspect.

Now what can we make of this? Well, we can make of it an explanation of our appreciation of great books written in the past, often about matters over with and done. The facts now have little importance to us, but the writer's sense of the meanings of that past time comes through as a kind of illumination. If, then, meanings are all-important, and they seem to be, why don't we just study meanings and let go all the historical or factual details? But these extracts of meaning, however sublime, are not enough. Hannah Arendt refuses to take us by the hand and lead our minds to the great philosophical systems of the world, those would-be distillations of meaning. Mr. Kateb explains:

> Knowingly or not, their great makers have in almost all cases produced metaphors of the activity of thinking itself. In straining to speak the truth about reality and the mind's relation to it, they have been throwing off hints about the process of thinking itself, the very process that engenders formal doctrines about reality and mind (except in the case of a pure thinker like Socrates, who was pure because he espoused no doctrine). Arendt means to free us of the criterion of truth when we approach metaphysical systems. She insists that truth is the proper criterion only of the labor of the in*tellect:* trains of thought that issue in everyday or scientific "cognition" or knowledge. Meaning, on the other hand, is the criterion of the work of *reason:* trains of thought that issue from thinking.

George Kateb thinks that this low-rating of metaphysical systems may be an extreme—as indeed it is, since we cannot do without them—but the point of Hannah Arendt's criticism may be seen by looking at the other material we have for discussion. For our instruction in the intellectual world of Thomas More, Hugh Trevor-Roper presents an account of Plato's thinking:

> Platonism, in one word, is idealism, the determination to identify the universal spirit which informs matter and, having identified it, to disengage it from its bewildering variety, the inert machinery, the practical compromises in which it is so often trapped and buried. In religion the Platonist seeks the animating spirit, and is impatient of theological discipline and ritual. In secular life also—if he interests himself in secular life—he seeks an ideal society which can preserve itself against corruption and, by a stable constitution, dispense with the sordid trivialities of day-to-day politics. The quest for such a spirit, the demand for such an ideal stability, arises most naturally in an age of hectic change, a time of apparent corruption, disintegration, decay.

Noting that Plato lived in such an age—indeed, Plato speaks in his letters of the turmoil of his time as the reason why he withdrew from politics to seek guidance in philosophy—Trevor-Roper says that in the *Republic* Plato "imagined a form of society which, at whatever cost to freedom, would preserve itself forever, without change." Let us, he said in effect, imagine a society governed by meanings—which are eternal—and not by fallible laws made by fallible men. Let us realize the ways of spirit and make them our ways on earth. Mr. Trevor-Roper comments:

> Platonism was thus essentially anti-historical, as it was also anti-theological. In religion it insisted on the immortality of the human soul and the divine guidance of the world. In politics it pursued the

> mirage of an ideal state, preserved alike against political corruption and historical change. Fortunately, perhaps, most Platonists did not go in for politics. They were artists, visionaries, mystics, saints, and their function was to illuminate, not to govern. But when they speculated in political matters, the result was always the same. Whatever their culture—whether ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, pagan, Christian, or Moslem—they invariably produced totalitarian systems, repellent to liberal men.

In consequence, such great thinkers have been perennially attacked by liberal critics. But we should note that in speaking of these intellectual structures, George Kateb says: *"Knowingly or not,* their great makers have in almost all cases produced metaphors of the activity of thinking itself." There seems little doubt that Plato was a "knowing" one. And according to Northrop Frye, so was Thomas More.

Trevor-Roper describes More's *Utopia* as the work of a man who longed to be always a Platonist, a seeker for truth, yet who was drawn into politics by the urgencies of his time. How, for that matter, does one apply the dictates of Platonic idealism in a world like ours? The world will not cooperate. Does, indeed, thinking unfit us for a life effective in practical human affairs? Trevor-Roper continues:

> Divided souls have long agonies, but they also have moments of productive fusion. More's moment of fusion came in 1515, and its product was his greatest work, *Utopia*. For four centuries men have argued about the meaning of that work, and at the end there is still no agreement about it. It is as mysterious as More himself; to it, as to him, we agree only in ascribing the indefinable quality of greatness. Some have seen *Utopia* as an expression of nostalgia for medieval traditionalism; others as a blueprint for modern socialism, or even for modern imperialism; others, like More himself (but we must remember his Socratic irony), as a mere *ludibrium*, a jeu d'esprit, a holiday exercise. I believe that, to understand it, we should set it in the context of his mind—a mind which was (I have suggested) fundamentally Platonic. Like Plato's *Republic*, like every expression of Platonic philosophy in politics from Plato to Marx, it is an attempt to escape from history, an attempt to freeze historical change, to fix a society, whose ordinary course is seen as disintegration and corruption, in an ideal mold: a mold which, by the very terms of its existence, is, and must be, repellent to liberal men.

But did Plato really expect his *Republic* to become the basis for corporate action? One must wonder about this, especially in the light of the closing passage of Book IX, where Socrates, in dialogue with Glaucon, describes the conduct of the philosopher:

> And will he not deal likewise with the ordering and harmonizing of his possessions? He will not let himself be dazzled by the felicitations of the multitude and pile up the mass of his wealth without measure, involving himself in measureless ills.
>
> No, I think not, he said.
>
> He will rather, I said, keep his eyes fixed on the constitution in his soul, and taking care and watching lest he disturb anything there either by excess or deficiency of wealth, will so steer his course and add to or detract from his wealth on this principle, so far as may be.
>
> Precisely so, he said.
>
> And in the matter of honors and office too this will be his guiding principle. He will gladly take part in and enjoy those which he thinks will make him a better man, but in public and private life he will shun those that may overthrow the established habit of his soul.
>
> Then, if that is his chief concern, he said, he will not willingly take part in politics.
>
> Yes, by the dog, said I, in his own city he certainly will, yet perhaps not in the city of his birth, except in some providential conjecture.
>
> I understand, he said. You mean the city whose establishment we have described, the city whose home is in the ideal, for I think that it can be found nowhere on earth.
>
> Well, said I, perhaps there is a pattern of it laid up in heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and so beholding to constitute himself its citizen. But it makes no difference whether it exists now or ever will come into being. The politics of this city only will be his and none other.
>
> That seems probable, he said.

This is hardly the mood of a totalitarian writer, whatever has been made of the proposals in the *Republic* by those who have copied or borrowed from Plato. A considerable light on all such questions is given by Northrop Frye in an essay published in 1969 (*Higher Education: Demand and Response,* edited by W. R. Niblett):

> If we take a second look at our greatest Utopians, Plato and More, we notice that Socrates in the *Republic* is not concerned about setting up his ideal state anywhere: what he is concerned about is the analogy between his ideal state and the structure of the wise man's mind, with its reason, will and desire corresponding to the philosopher-king, soldiers, and artisans of the political myth. The ideal state exists, so far as we know, only in such minds, which will obey its laws whatever society they are actually living in. Similarly, More calls his ideal state Utopia, meaning nowhere. Hythloday (the "babbler"), who has been to Nowhere, has returned a revolutionary communist, convinced that nothing can be done with Europe until it has been destroyed and a replica of the Utopia set up in its place. But More himself, to whom the story is being told, suggests using the knowledge of Utopia rather as a means of bringing about an improvement in European society from within. Plato and More realize that while the wise man's mind is rigidly disciplined, and while the mature state is ordered, we cannot take the analogy between the disciplined mind and the disciplined state too literally. For Plato certainly, and for More probably, the wise man's mind is a ruthless dictatorship of reason over appetite, achieved by control of the will. When we translate this into its social equivalents of a philosopher-king ruling workers by storm troopers (not "guardians," as in Jowett, but "guards"), we get the most frightful tyranny. But the real Utopia is an individual goal, of which the disciplined society is an allegory. The reason for the allegory is that the Utopian ideal points beyond the individual to a condition in which, as in Kant's kingdom of ends, society and individual are no longer in conflict, but have become different aspects of the same body.

Why, one may ask, if the risk of misunderstanding is so great, do these philosophers nonetheless write "allegories," or put their wisdom in "metaphors of the activity of thinking," as Hannah Arendt said? The answer must be that they want to be *read,* yet hope for readers who can see between the lines. Note that as a systematizer, Plato was not very effective. He didn't want his allegory—the political myth of the *Republic*—to sound too real. Myth is by nature ambiguous. And he did what he could to prevent anyone from nailing down with precise definition his conception of the timeless realm of Ideas or Forms. Perhaps his purpose was rather to communicate the spirit of true thinking, the Socratic kind, to be absorbed by his readers by a kind of osmosis.

Intellectual capacities are certainly involved in Socratic thinking, but the cognitive function alone, or the tight syllogistic progression, does not energize the two-in-one dialogue Hannah Arendt holds in respect. On the other hand, if Plato had written books about Conscience alone, he might today have no readers at all. We seem to discover truth only in the grain of life, even though there may be no truth in the grain of life per se. A combination seems required. We have to be there, working on things, doing what we came to do, yet at the same time realize that what we are really after is *something else.* Some of the alchemists understood this well.

George Kateb is troubled by Hannah Arendt's cavalier disposition of the pursuit of metaphysical truth, taking instead the arousal of conscience, or the capture of the substance of meaning, as the real objective of thinking. As he says:

> To be freed of the criterion of truth is troubling enough to anyone who looks to philosophy for help in understanding the way things are. More troubling still is the claim that thinking is mostly about itself; or that, for philosophers, the world has existed so that the incredible difficulties connected with the phenomenon of self-consciousness could be projected onto it, and thus made perhaps a little less difficult.

Well, but what if she is right! When we read something written down, say, five thousand years ago—the *Bhagavad-Gita*—or something written 2500 years ago—the *Phaedo*—or something written last year or last week, which manages to throw light on the mystery of self-consciousness, however obliquely that is something we are likely

to read over and over again. Without the metaphor, we'd have nothing to work on.

So with all the forms of communication. What do we learn finally from Dostoevsky, from Tolstoy, from Blake? From the allegories of Olive Schreiner? From the longings of Albert Camus? Or from the really good historians, whom we read with interest, regardless of the period under examination? Whatever the accuracy and lucid excellences of what they have to say about the past, it is always *ourselves* who are under examination. Otherwise, history is a waste.

In a letter of gratitude and appreciation to his teacher, Frederick Jackson Turner, Carl Becker said in 1910:

> I remember you said once that it was all very well to poke fun at the Philosophy of history, but that after all it was impossible not to have some kind of a Philosophy of history, the vital point being whether one's Philosophy amounted to anything. And more than once I have heard you say: "History is the self-consciousness of humanity." That, at the time, meant absolutely nothing to me, but the phrase must have been working in the "fringe" of *my* consciousness all these years, for I have recently hazarded in print the thesis that "we must have a past that is the product of all the present." That, I take it, is the same as saying that history is the self-consciousness of humanity. . . . I remember that you tried to interest us in the Blue Ridge, and the Cumberland Gap and the old Cumberland Road (or some such road). What it was you said, I have forgotten; but I remember precisely the manner in which you said it. It was a manner that carried conviction—the manner of one who utters moral truths and somehow it has ever since stuck in my mind that the Blue Ridge, and the Cumberland Gap, and the old Cumberland Road (or whatever road it was) are threads that will unravel the whole tangled skein of American history.
>
> To me, nothing can be duller than historical facts; nothing more interesting than the service they can be made to render in the effort to solve the everlasting riddle of human existence. It is from you, my dear Professor Turner, more than from anyone else, that I learned to distinguish historical facts from their uses.

It is no anti-climax to add here that among modern historians, no one has been better able to subtract dullness from historical facts than Carl Becker. For the evidence see his *Everyman his own Historian* and *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers.*

REVIEW
COBBETT AND HIS HEIRS

IN his biographical sketch of the writer, the introduction to a recent edition of William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* (Penguin paperback), George Woodcock begins with a summer evening in England a hundred and fifty years ago. Sitting in an inn, Cobbett looked out the window on the grassy uplands of Wiltshire, where great herds of sheep were returning from pasture, and a wonder came over him—a wonder "that a heart and mind so wrapped up in everything belonging to the gardens, the fields and the woods, should have been condemned to waste themselves away among the stench, the noise and the strife of cities." No man loved rural England more, yet Cobbett was driven to take part in urban strife by a lively and undying determination to battle for the diminishing rights of yeoman farmers and farm laborers.

Mr. Woodcock relates:

> In 1805, having left the army and worked for five years as a political journalist in London, the great Wen on the sickly body of England, he bought a property at Botley and resolved to settle down for the rest of his life as a farmer. Within two years he had declared himself a radical and leapt back into the political struggle; in three more years he was up for trial on a charge of sedition, and his life in the country became intermittent, broken by the years in prison and American exile, until, in 1821, he sold the Botley farm and settled in Kensington. But even on the edge of the smoky Wen, he still tried to live at least as a half-farmer, growing seeds for sale to sympathetic countrymen while he edited his independent Radical journal, the *Political Register.*

Cobbett was a strongly opinionated man. This gave his writing impact, while his motives, his transparent rage against social injustice, were completely clear. He loved the land and the working farmers of England. He knew both from inside out. When he went out to meet and talk with his countrymen, he went on horseback, not in a carriage. His object, he said, was not to see the roads and inns, but the *country*—

> . . . to see the farmers at *home,* and to see the labourers *in the fields;* and to do this you must go either on foot or on horseback. With a *gig* you cannot get about amongst the *byelanes* and *across fields,* through bridle-ways and hunting gates; and to tramp it is too slow, leaving the *labour* out of the question, and that is not a trifle.

He went on these rides as a retired farmer—a man who knew at first hand the arts of the husbandman—while his journalistic background enabled him to see far more than an ordinary traveler. Most of all he saw the changes in the countryside since his own childhood. Riding through the South of England—

> The open commons he remembered had been enclosed, the villages were becoming depopulated, the country houses were falling down, the cottagers—England's peasantry—had been turned into starving half-paupers by the vicious Speenhamland system of public relief which paid part of the labourer's miserable wages out of the poor rates. Cobbett in the 1820s saw the English countryside at the most depressed stage or phase of the agrarian revolution, between the lost and nostalgically remembered days of subsistence farming under the old open-field system, and the prosperous era of high farming in the mid-Victorian decades which Cobbett did not live to share.

What did he write about? The diversity of his interests comes out in this as in other of his books—he wrote magnificently on farming and gardening—but here the fight for justice is all-pervasive. George Woodcock says:

> One of the most effective expositions of the injustice done to the farm labourers, for example, consists of a painstaking study of the valley of the Wiltshire Avon, surveying its farms and villages as he rides from top to bottom, estimating production with an expert eye, and then showing that the labourers of the valley collectively produce about fifteen times as much food as they receive under the system of near-starvation wages that prevails in 1826 when he travels through the country.

The quality of Cobbett's writing is illustrated by his summary of this argument, which comes after five or six pages of careful analysis:

> Now, then, according to the POPULATION RETURN, laid before Parliament, this parish contains five hundred persons, or, according to my division, one hundred families. So that here are about *one-hundred* families to raise food and drink enough, and to raise wool and other things to pay for all other necessaries for *five hundred* and *two* families! Aye and five hundred and two families fed and lodged, too, *on my liberal scale.* Fed and lodged according to *the present scale,* this one hundred families raise enough to supply more, and many

> more, than *fifteen hundred* families; or *seven thousand five hundred* persons! And yet *those who do the work are half starved!* In the 100 families there are, we will suppose, 80 able working men, and as many boys, sometimes assisted by the women and stout girls. What a handful of people to raise such a quantity of food! What injustice, what a hellish system it must be, to make those who raise it *skin and bone and nakedness*, while the food and drink and wool are almost all carried away to be heaped on the fund-holders, pensioners, soldiers, dead-weight, and other swarms of tax-eaters! If such an operation do not need putting an end to, then the devil is himself a saint.

A reading of William Cobbett, a farmer at heart, may recall what Gandhi said about his own career in 1920:

> If I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake.
>
> To me political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life. Political power means capacity to regulate national life though national representatives. If national life becomes so perfect as to become self-regulated, no representation becomes necessary. There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In such a state every man is his own ruler. He rules himself in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbor. In the ideal state, therefore, there is no political power because there is no State. But the ideal is never fully realized in life. Hence the classical statement of Thoreau that that government is best which governs least.

Meanwhile, the struggle to compel government to undo its wrongs—and then get out of the way—continues with little change, except on the surface, from century to century. A good book to read *with* Cobbett's dramatic appeals would be *The Village Labourer* by J. L. and Barbara Hammond. While the work of scholars, this study of what happened to rural England during the dispossession of the yeomen of their land, by enclosure of the commons, gets into the grain of life, somewhat as Cobbett does.

For reading after Cobbett, there is *Land for the People,* edited by Herbert Giradet and published in 1976 by Crescent Books (8A Leighton Crescent, London N.W.S.) at £1.20. Here one finds the same combination of concern for English land and for human justice that is all through Cobbett's writing. There are historical articles in the book on past oppression of farmers, and studies of how England may learn to feed her people through an intelligent and just agricultural policy. There is this, for example, by Tony Farmer, who writes on "Reviving the Land":

> The farmers of Britain claim they produce half the meat consumed in this country. But they only do so by importing cheap protein and mineral fertilizers, indulging in disgusting practices such as indoor factory farming and, always and forever, as they have done for thousands of years in this climate struggling with vast quantities of fodder for animals too exotic or overtired to manage the winter. Add to this the ever-growing problem of dealing with the mountains of manure from winter and permanent quarters, none of which will move very far without powerful and costly mechanical help.
>
> It is being shown in central Wales among the hills which are at present principally lambing areas that most vegetable crops may be attempted with good success on a labour-intensive horticultural level, and it is no unusual thing to claim that on any acres at present used for lambing, *ten* to *twenty* times more human food may be produced in vegetable form. A comprehensive range of crops can be grown which can cover the entire nutritional requirements of a family, with the addition of some good quality oil or animal fat and some milk for infant feeding. Some things do extra well, acquiring a distinctive tang from wind-swept, slightly acidic slopes and a large bonus is given the vegetable grower in the absence of brassica diseases, and pests. Barley and oats do well in most years and I have heard a personal account of bread being eaten by a local farmer and made from wheat grown on his own farm, during wartime, at an altitude of 1000 feet.

An essential message of this book is well put by Robert Waller:

> In the last five years or so drastic rises in the price of the farm inputs required to maintain . . . high technology farming led to a crisis as yet unresolved . . . the most efficient farms are becoming the least efficient—since efficiency is only an economic reckoning based on the production of cheap food. . . . What should be plain even to British politicians—most of whose "progressive" ideas are a hundred years out of date—is that *the consumer ought to be subsidising home agriculture, not cheap food.*

COMMENTARY
USEFUL DEFINITIONS

IN the *Structurist* for 1977-78, in a discussion of poetry as an instrument of education, George Whalley provides definitions of education and discipline which seem so fundamental that we reproduce them here:

> Education, I take it, is a self-constructive process in which a person makes himself real by discovering how to place his full resources at the disposal of whatever he most values. As a process, education is less properly concerned with accumulating "knowledge" than with finding out how to establish certain states of mind. In recent years educational theorists have declared that everything must be done "freely," "naturally," without restraint, and largely without guidance. As a result, many young people are now coming to university who have not only *learned* very little, but also show little aptitude for skillful and concentrated inquiry. That is, they have probably engaged in a parody of "research" but have discovered little discipline. From this I suspect that discipline is commonly represented as an intrusion upon personal freedom and destructive of something unaccountably called "creativity."
>
> Discipline, however, is simply the way of calling up and establishing the way of mind in which particular enterprises can be undertaken with some reasonable prospect of success. Discipline, as a way of bringing on learners, does not turn upon imprinting doctrine; rather, it is practice and exercise in establishing certain desired dispositions of the mind. Discipline is usually based on the accumulated experience of practitioners; it is more often concerned with discovering effective talismans and tricks of integrative concentration (how to "keep your eye on the ball") than with "technique" (a preformulated scheme of performance). The mind becomes agile through activity, especially through those activities most difficult to induce and most delicate to sustain. To withdraw discipline is as serious as to deprive a child of the development of speech; the effects can be irreversible.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish": without discipline there is no sustained vision.

Mr. Whalley is head of the English department at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. What he says about "knowledge" seems closely related to what is said about "facts" in this week's lead article:

> Accumulated "knowledge" is essential to education, not merely because what is known can be applied to the understanding of what is not known, but because it enriches the mind with resonant materials; it gives us something to *think with* and something to *respond from.* Through what we know and the way we know, we become more *knowing*, we can open ourselves to wider, more subtle, and more exacting areas of inquiry than, uneducated, we might ever have come upon.

How, then, would we recognize a genuinely educated human? The writer speaks to this point:

> As self-education progresses and judgment matures, we discover an increasing personal *dis*engagement from what we know and want to know. The sense of *relation* becomes paramount, the emphasis not falling exclusively upon either "object" or "subject." We become less inclined to value certain things simply because we like them or because they seem to belong to us, or because they merge comfortably with our cherished states of mind or our images of ourselves.

Here Mr. Whalley has quietly and undramatically described how a human being becomes wise. The acquisitive mind depends upon analysis, the active mind upon synthesis. The mind which becomes familiar with the modes of synthesis—which seeks meaning inventively, habitually, and determinedly, as well as critically—is in a state of preparedness for action. How does the poem help in this? The poetic mode of language is filled with intuitive leaps. By a refinement of his perceptive powers, the poet makes in language a synthesis of meaning that becomes, for the reader, a kind of dress-rehearsal for life.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
HEALTH AND HORROR

IN No. 7 of *Growing Without Schooling* John Holt makes this comment:

> Many things in the world around me seem to me ugly, wasteful, foolish, cruel, destructive, and wicked. How much of this should I talk to children about? I tend to feel, not much. I prefer to let, or help, children explore as much of the world as they can, and then make up their own minds about it. If they ask me what I think about something I will tell them. But if I have to criticize the world in their hearing I prefer to do it in specifics, rather than give the idea that I think the world, *in general*, is a bad place. I don't think it is, and for all the bad that is in it, I would much rather be in it than out of it. I am in no hurry to leave. Even if I thought the world, and the people in it, were more bad than good, I don't think I would tell the children so. Time enough for them to learn all that is bad. I would not have wanted to know, when I was young, all that I now know about what is wrong with the world. I'm not sure that I could have stood to know it. Time, and experience, and many friends and pleasures, have given me many assets to balance against that knowledge, things to put in the other side of the scales. Children don't have many of these. They need time to learn about some of the good things while they are learning (as they are bound to) about the bad.

These observations recalled a book about some children who died in a Nazi death camp. It showed their drawings, which seemed so *happy*, and printed their poems. As adults, we have a hard time accepting such things. Those children were doomed; how could they *play?* Perhaps they didn't know, but the cruel irony of their situation gets in the way of enjoying the book. Yet the drawings have the spontaneity of children's natural pleasure. This excites wonder.

There are persisting questions. Did their happiness have a *value?* Those human beings were going to be erased. To say that we are all going to die some day doesn't seem to help. How, ideally, should a man condemned to die spend his last hours on earth? Drawing pictures? A Socrates could do it. A Socrates could do it because he does not fear death. Children do it because they don't think about death.

People often object to the idea that the last best hope of the world is the spread of human understanding and practice of fraternity. That would be fine, they say, but we don't have *time!* But is this a good reason for attempting remedies that don't really work? Are the gentle and wise things we do wiped out at death, or do they somehow go on, accumulating their good in a metaphysical storage area that the world will be able to draw upon some day? A lot depends upon such questions.

A children's doctor Helen Caldicott, writes about war in the Jan. 15 *Washington Spectator*. What she says applies to the anxious "no time" attitude:

> What would happen if a bomb hit Washington? Do you know that most of the doctors live in the metropolitan area? The hospital beds would be totally destroyed. There will be no drugs. You cannot escape the blast or the fire effect. If you are outside the periphery of the blast and fire and do escape, you will have to stay in the shelter for two weeks, because if you come out before that time there will be so much radiation, you will die within 48 hours of acute apathic syndrome, and that is what the neutron bomb does. You get so much radiation that your brain cells swell and the pressure inside the skull increases, and for 48 hours you have delirium, you are ataxic, you cannot walk straight, you may become psychotic, you have high fevers, you may have a period of lucidity before you die. Or you may survive for two weeks.

Few will object to publishing such anticipations, however gruesome. Facts must be faced, we say. But another Harvard doctor, Lester Grinspoon, a psychiatrist, has said:

> The truth about the nature and risk of thermonuclear war is available; the reason why it is not embraced is because it is not acceptable. People cannot risk being overwhelmed by the anxiety which might accompany a full cognitive and affective grasp of the present world situation and its implications for the future. It serves a man no useful purpose to accept this truth if to do so leads only to the development of very disquieting feelings, feelings

> which interfere with his capacity to be productive, to enjoy life, and to maintain his mental equilibrium. . . .
>
> A psychiatrist does not offer an interpretation his patient is not prepared to deal with. Furthermore, it is his responsibility to understand what the consequences will be, what it will mean to this particular patient in this particular relationship and this particular time. He does not make it simply because it exists or because he feels the patient must know. . . .
>
> Similarly, he who would have others know "the truth" must take into account what "the truth" would mean to them and how they would respond to it. The truth has a relativity in interpersonal affairs; it has meaning only in relation to people, and this meaning is often difficult to anticipate. The messenger of "truth" bears part of the responsibility for the results of his effort.

The stark unacceptability of death in a fire storm is one thing; but the aftermath of nuclear war another, which needs to be recognized and understood. Dr. Caldicott goes on:

> A survivor of Hiroshima, a 13-year-old boy, perfectly well, comes in with a few bruises. He has a blood test; he has leukemia. He is put into a ward by himself so nobody can breathe germs on him. He lives in constant terror for two weeks on drugs, and one day he dies in the middle of the night, bleeding from every orifice.
>
> We are talking about life. Cancer doubled in Hiroshima fifteen years later and it is still increasing in incidence, now, 30 years after the bomb was dropped. Our country builds or refits new nuclear weapons every day, and Russia is building them, too. It is an absolute miracle they have not been used.
>
> There is the problem of the psychological stability of heads of state with the power to start a nuclear war. Was Nixon psychologically stable? Three years ago he had control of the mechanism to start a nuclear war. The men in the Titan missile silos who have to press a lever simultaneously to start a nuclear war are each armed with a pistol to shoot the other if one goes insane. We have now developed enough weapons to probably wipe out all living organisms on earth, not just us. Yet we talk of building more weapons.

Well, one thing we can do is to refuse to dignify or take seriously such "weapons" talk. It is, on its face, insane. And we can refuse public office to people ready to spend their time considering such things as possibilities.

Children have a stake in all this:

> Do you know that two thirds of the world's children are malnourished and starving? Do you know that more than half the scientists in this country work for the military-industrial complex? Do you know that with the export of nuclear power plants to Vietnam, to Taiwan, to the Philippines, to mention a few unstable governments, those governments can make nuclear weapons from the plutonium produced in the reactors, as India did in 1974 when Canada sold her a reactor?
>
> This is a medical issue and it is one of survival. We must live now with trust, and not with mutual distrust. Pope John before he died said we must now start trusting. The fundamental principle on which our present peace depends must be replaced by another which declares that the true and solid peace of nations consists not in equality of arms, but in mutual trust alone. You must think about this. It is not up to politicians to decide the future fate of humanity. It is up to every single person on earth, man, woman, and child, because it is our earth.

A book that might help people to adopt this attitude is *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (McGraw-Hill), the poems and drawings of the children in the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp during 1942-44, edited by Hanna Volvavkova. The collection partly reproduced in this book is in the Prague State Jewish Museum.

FRONTIERS

Problems and Solutions

PEOPLE have problems—more and more of them—which they try to handle one by one. They spend less on food, gasoline, and heating, but *good* food at the health food store costs more, while a bike-way is no help to anyone who has to commute thirty miles on a freeway to work. And no free fire-wood can be foraged by anyone who lives in a city or a suburb.

This is the sort of situation which overtakes the people of a society which has been doing a lot of things wrong in an organized, institutional way. The cards are stacked against intelligent change. The system is very much in the way. Well, there will always be problems having only painful, slow-moving solutions. Eventually, the changes will come about through the pioneering of those few who are free enough to do what they think is right, and resourceful enough to prove that it works. Sometimes they are able to take full advantage of system breakdowns, showing how simple labor-intensive solutions are better than complicated ones. Examples? See the publications of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (1717 18th St. N.W., Wash. D.C. 20009) and of the New Alchemy Institute (P.O. Box 47, Woods Hole, Mass. 02543). Governments have some (over-estimated) power to do good, but they seldom know how to use it, and tend to be paralyzed by the idea that the best use of power would be to deliberately *reduce* the power of government by supporting local responsibility and resourcefulness.

In a recent report of his travels in Europe (*Resurgence*, November-December 1978), John Seymour shows how this might work—is already working. He tells about an encounter at one of the farms of Longo Mai in France:

> This bunch of young people—they remind me of some order of chivalry—dedicate themselves for life, to getting the deserted Alpine regions populated again. In four years they have sprung from a small bunch of student dissidents to a group of cooperatives owning half a dozen farms scattered through all the Alpine countries (save Germany—they cannot make any headway there although many of them are Germans). They have screwed *three million pounds* out of the city people of Switzerland (who, God knows, have enough money) and every penny of this they have spent on setting up cooperatives for peasants, craftsmen and small business people in the alpine regions. They have done more to repopulate the Alps than all the government agencies in the world. They look like becoming a European power—and a power to be reckoned with, too. Even now the EEC, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN, individual governments, and other august bodies consult them before deciding anything to do with helping people in the Alps. I hope their movement spreads. It is spreading, to Eire, where they have been invited to start cooperatives by the government, to Yugoslavia, where they have been visited by Tito. They are going to visit us in Wales. They are *doing* all the things we would dearly love to do, but cannot do because of complete lack of funds. They have touched the conscience of the Swiss people who have fled from their land. They might find it a little more difficult to touch the conscience of the Great British public, though.

Well, John Seymour has been touching it, here and there. Actually *doing* things is likely to be far better than supporting with tax money things that people *say* are good. In the Winter *Co-Evolution Quarterly* J. Baldwin reviews a book on mass transport (*Transportation and Energy* by Charles Lave), using the BART system in the San Francisco area as a horrible example:

> The energy invested in constructing BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit] is so large, and the operating energy savings are so small that it will take 535 years to break even on its investment, much less save any energy. . . . The "engineering" studies put together to sell a transit system to community voters generally manage to both overstate the number of passengers the system can attract, and to understate the cost of building it. BART again provides an interesting example of the contrast between reality and forecasts: it cost almost twice as much to build, it draws less than half the passengers, and it uses double the energy that was forecast. The system that was projected to "make a major impact on traffic" actually carries only 270 of the trips in its patronage area.

The effects of such systems "on congestion and pollution are either very small," Baldwin says, "or even negative." Meanwhile, the system recently proposed for Los Angeles would be "the largest public works program of all time." Moral: Do things we can understand and control.

An interesting sidelight on the multinationals is given in *Technology Review* for last December. According to Richard Robinson, of MIT, these enormous enterprises, owned in one country while doing business around the world, are slowly weakening in power and influence. First, technological skills are spreading to developing countries and they are doing more manufacturing themselves, while responsible governments are refusing to let foreigners take charge of their economic affairs.

There are other reasons, including the emergence of some social intelligence in the business community. No doubt such trends are too little and too late, yet growing weaknesses in the old way of doing things reduce the barriers to change.

John Perlin—one of the rememberers of Pasadena's numerous solar heating devices at the turn of the century—has a modest proposal for persuading the U.S. government to get solidly behind solar energy projects. Convince the politicians, he says, that with solar energy the U.S. can destroy the world:

> We have an historical precedent from the 13th Century. Roger Bacon warned the Pope that the Arabs had a secret weapon—focusing mirrors to focus sunlight. This was the ultimate secret weapon which the power of geometry could produce. . . . He told the Pope that anti-Christ will burn Europe in a few years . . . "Unless you give me research and development funds." (Winter *CoEvolution Quarterly.*)

Bacon didn't get the funds, but, says John Perlin, "if all of you write your congressmen or write your senators that we can destroy the world with solar energy, solar energy will come."

In the January *Organic Gardening,* Wendell Berry tells about the potatoes raised by peasants in Peru, where all the potatoes in the world originally came from. Now they are grown there on Andean slopes higher that most mountaintops in the United States. Stephen Brush, an American student of Andean agriculture, showed Berry the potato farms. He said that the Peruvian (Indian) peasants "farm with a highly refined ecological sensitivity, competently attentive both to the capacities and the limits of their fields, and to the relationship between crop variety and location." Berry comments:

Variety is the security of agriculture, as of biology. Unlike the scientific agriculturalists who give priority to "efficiency," the Andean farmers' first principle is variety. . . .

> Over the centuries, he [Brush] said, the peasant farmers have done a lot of selecting of varieties. And the varieties thus developed suit their needs well. They will grow the "improved" potatoes developed by plant geneticists, but 90 per cent of these are grown for sale. The farmers don't keep and use them because they don't like their taste. They are too watery, and they don't keep well. The introduced varieties yield possibly 30 percent more than the native, but they may be 90 per cent water, whereas the native varieties will be 80 per cent.
>
> Might it not be, I thought, that subsistence farming is the very definition of good farming—not all the anachronism that the "agribusinessmen" and "agriscientists" would have us believe?