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UNBINDING OBSERVANCES

WE return to a subject several times discussed in these pages, for the reason that the provocation to give it attention goes on and on. The subject is the no doubt worthy begging letters that come in almost every mail—at least several times a week. These good people need money to carry on their important work—nobody, after all, especially nobody in business, will hire you to try to stop war, or prevent massacres by the Ku Klux Klan, or to find the thousands of people who have "disappeared" in Argentina, to prevent MX installations, or expose and oppose the country's plans to "win" a nuclear conflagration. These "problems"—what a weasel word—are not the concern of businessmen as businessmen. They are not the concern of anyone submerged in the "mainstream" activities of modern life. And for most of us, just making what one hopes is a decent living takes nearly all our time and energy.

If, on the other hand, you decide as a human being that at least some of these immeasurable and endless evils ought to be stopped, there is the practically unanswerable question—which ones are worst and need attention most?—since our personal resources are limited. So you budget and make a contribution, wondering at the same time whether giving the money will do any good. You have been getting these letters for years and years, and there are more of them now, and next year still more urgent appeals will come in. How, you may ask, would you write one of those begging letters to yourself, in a way that would get results? Could you do it? Or is there some other way, some more effective way, to "participate" in humane action?

The question calls for an examination of the prevailing or conventional attitudes of the time we live in. These attitudes or opinions make the pattern for what we call "getting things done." The examination is called for because of an obvious reason: the important things are not getting done. So we ask, under what circumstances *would* they get done? Looking at the American past, Rufus E. Miles, Jr., for years an official of the Health, Education, and Welfare department of the government, found a partial answer to this question. In *Awakening from the American Dream* (Universe Books) he said:

> It probably never occurred to the authors of the Bill of Rights to write into the Constitution a Bill of Responsibilities. . . . Since all 13 colonies were made up of farms and small towns, with only a few cities of consequence, responsibilities, to the extent that they went beyond the family, were cooperatively determined by one's neighbors in a town meeting or its equivalent. . . . Since citizens and their families were remote from the national government, and largely self-sufficient within communities where they knew almost everyone else and could observe their behavior, responsibility was implicit in daily life. . . . When communities are small enough so that each person recognizes by sight and knows the names of most of the persons he or she sees every day and feels that he or she knows or has some sort of meaningful access to the leaders of the community and role in it, the concept of responsibility can be and usually is inextricably integrated with daily living. The larger the social unit, the more difficult it becomes to achieve this mesh, and when the political unit becomes a huge city, where people live in mammoth high-rise apartment complexes, shop in supermarkets, know few of the people they see on the streets, have no way of distinguishing "neighbors" from strangers and therefore belong to no community, the voluntary exercise of social responsibility becomes more exceptional and heroic than normal. . . .
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> The community and its partial urban substitute, the neighborhood, have, over the years, served affirmative psychological as well as economic and protective purposes. They establish human connections with other people who have roots in the unique place in which they live and from which they take psychic nourishment. Those associations develop into varying degrees of trust and affection and frequently of unspoken loyalty to the common bond and humanity of the group. Membership in a

> genuine community has a strong tendency to enlarge the capacity of each member for accepting and extending mutual trust. In this sense, it provides a depth of meaning to life that is difficult to obtain by any substitute means. When trust is extended, so too is responsibility. Some people, of course, in any environment, shrink from both trust and responsibility; the more inhospitable the environment, the greater the proportion of such people.

What are the inadequate "substitute means" to which we have become accustomed? Insurance is a good example Instead of expecting to help your neighbor in case of disaster, like a fire, and expecting him to help you in a time of trouble, you purchase a measurable amount of "trust" from a company in that business. Every insurance policy one owns, you could say, is a symbol of additional isolation from one's neighbors. An experience on a Los Angeles freeway described by the Iranian architect, Nader Khalili (in *Racing Alone*), drives this point home. Khalili stopped to help an old man who had driven into a construction ditch. Afterward the driver tried to pay him, but Khalili wouldn't take the money. He had not stopped to help for money:

> This man was so surprised at the moment when I stopped my car to help him that he didn't even know how to ask for help. He'd probably never learned to ask for help, anyway. And now he immediately wanted to pay back what he thought was his obligation. This man was covered by more than six layers of insurance, but never thought that he might need the help of a fellow human being.

Khalili concluded that "the single most effective force leading toward the destruction of the very essence of the American heroic, pioneering character of extending the helping hand has been the insurance companies. They create a fear of the need for help, and then offer insurance—salvation; a superficial self-sufficiency and peace of mind."

What then shall we do? Abolish the insurance business? Take our chances with the Law of Karma, as a Buddhist might suggest? Put our trust in the fellowship of our neighbors, as they do in us? Or is it safer to pay our money for its monetary facsimile, only to discover that while the large print giveth, the small print taketh away? Richard Goodwin in *The American Condition* gave depth to the process of transferring our allegiance from community to the financial basis of urban life:

> Deeply personal ties, which had extruded the consciousness of the age, a mode of thought, and a structure of values and perceptions, metamorphosed into commercial bonds. You no longer owed yourself; you owed money. . . . Once obligations . . . could be priced, then the fact of payment overshadowed, and ultimately displaced, the identity of the debtor. . . . The earth was transmuted into capital, its produce into income, and income into goods—not only to maintain life but to bring comfort, pleasure, luxury, beauty. The powerful sought ownership in addition to power and, finally, as a source of added power.

As this cultural (and moral) change proceeded, other alterations in the fabric of our social life were going on. A century or two ago the individual was a vital contributor to community life. He gave what was lacking and needed out of his own resources, improving the common life. But when commerce and money began to dominate human relationships, hired specialists and bureaucrats took over the fulfillments of community obligation. As Murray Bookchin put it in *The Limits of the City:*

> The bourgeois city separates these facets of life and delivers them, one by one, to institutions, denuding the ego of the rich content of life. Work is removed from the home and assimilated by giant organizations in offices and industrial factories. It loses its comprehensibility to the individual not only as a result of the minute division of labor, but owing also to the scale of commercial and industrial operations. Play becomes organized and the imaginative faculties of the individual are pre-empted by mass media that define the very daydreams of the ego. The individual is reduced to a vicarious spectator of his own fancies and pleasures. Reason and intellect are brought under the technical sovereignty of the academy and the specialist. Political life is taken over by immense bureaucratic institutions that manipulate people as "masses" and insidiously try to engineer public consent. . . . The urban ego, which once celebrated its many-faceted

> nature owing to the wealth of experience provided by the city, emerges with the bourgeois city as the most impoverished ego to appear in the course of urban development.

Well, we are still thinking about all those worthy begging letters we get, and how, along with other specializations, we have delegated our social obligations to agencies who give attention to the bad things going on in the world, and who have very good letter-writers who explain their work to us and ask for money so that their watchfulness and campaigns and lobbying efforts will be able to continue. Who would do these important things if there were not these people to function as conscience and do-gooders for us, in our ignorance and impotence?

Yet it seems all wrong. They, along with us, have submitted to the transformations described by Rufus Miles, Nader Khalili, Richard Goodwin, and Murray Bookchin (and the scores of other critics we haven't named). They are using the same techniques of persuasion that the politicians and the merchandisers use to get our vote and disposable income; they try to do it honestly, of course, but each of them, being wrapped up in his own cause, doesn't think much about all the other worthy causes, and neglects to consider how ridiculous it is to expect to get rid of evils by the same emasculating techniques that little by little, have made us all so isolated and remote from the fields of community action, while enlarging the things that are wrong with the uncontrollable coefficient of technology. No longer does a bell ring to call you to put out a nearby fire, or an agonized shout summon you to stop two crazy people from trying to murder each other. Now you get an envelope printed in two colors containing a letter which tells you you ought to help save a hundred thousand lives, or half a million children from starving to death. Not only is the task apparently impossible, but your competence to do anything real about it is gone. Then, in addition, you read in a book like *Food First* that during the worst years of famine and drought in the African Sahel—

> Ships in the Dakar port bringing in "relief" food departed with stores of peanuts, cotton, vegetables, and meat. Of the hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of agricultural goods the Sahel exported during the drought, over 60 per cent went to consumers in Europe and North America and the rest to elites in other African countries principally in the Ivory Coast and Nigeria.

The making of and reliance on money has made us strangers in a world of strangers, which is to say that now we are *all* barbarians, regardless of where we live. Can there be any other explanation for the foreign policies of the powerful nations of the modern world? That, of course, is the chief reason we go on getting all those letters from specialists in peace-making, in justice to the oppressed, in succor for the persecuted and needy, along with letters about tasty pecans and sugar-cured ham, and the right dress for joggers.

So we write our checks reluctantly, apprehensively, keeping them small, as we must, and wondering, again, will they do any good.

The real solution, of course, is the one proposed by E. F. Schumacher. It cannot be too often repeated:

> One of our fundamental needs is to be able to act in accordance with our moral impulses. In a big organization our freedom to do so is inevitably severely restricted. Our primary duty is to stay within the rules and regulations, which, although contrived by human beings, are not themselves human beings. . . .
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> Many books have been written about moral individuals in immoral society. As society is composed of individuals, how could a society be more immoral than its members? It becomes immoral if its structure is such that moral individuals cannot act in accordance with their moral impulses. And one method of achieving this dreadful result is by letting organizations become too large. (I am not asserting that there are no evil individuals capable of doing evil things no matter what may be the size of organizations or, generally the structure of society. It is when ordinary decent, harmless people do evil things that society gets into the deepest troubles.)

The parenthetical qualification is needed, to show that Schumacher took exceptional cases into

account, just as Rufus Miles noted that some people, "in any environment, shrink from both trust and responsibility," adding that "the more inhospitable the environment, the greater the proportion of such people." So the problem has been stated—effectively, we hope—and the solution given, the *only* solution, except for the heroic souls mentioned by Miles, those who will exercise responsibility in even the worst of environments. As most people will agree that there is no need and no use in writing programs for heroes, who seldom accept any plan of action save their own, we put the problem once again: How can we create a socio-moral environment which will enable ordinary people to act according to their moral impulses? Could anything be more important than this?

There is one immediate and practical answer: Start forming communities. Not just communities on the land, but communities in the cities, communities of people who hold visions in common, as well as neighborhood associations interested in clean, friendly, crime-free streets. The members of a community strengthen each other, support one another, help one another. Moral impulses are infectious. No one needs to preach when others can see what he is doing. Doing a few good things is enough for a beginning.

There is really no other way to reduce the scale of evil happenings to a manageable size. Power cannot do it. Power always moves in the opposite direction. Power is wholly uninterested in the moral impulses of human beings, regarding them as the stubbornest of obstructions to the increase of power—which of course they are. We should add that the manipulation of the moral qualities of human beings to serve the purposes of power is probably the greatest crime there is—a betrayal of the best in us all.

What are the obstacles to forming and living in community as much as we can? What stands in the way of the transfer of our allegiance from the present mechanisms of social life to the conscious organism of the small community? Habit, custom, law, in that order, stand in the way. Laws are no more than legal sanctions of the way we have already decided to live. If we change our ways, the laws will change, too. It will take time, but they will change.

Meanwhile, what are we up against? How should the obstacles be generalized, so that we can think about them more clearly? No one, so far as we know, has done this so well as Ortega. In the last chapter of his "sociology," *Man and People* (Norton, 1957), he says:

> Now, the greater part of the ideas by which we live, we have never thought for ourselves, on our own responsibility, nor even re-thought. We use them mechanically, on the authority of the collectivity in which we live and from which they waylaid us, penetrated to us under pressure like oil in an automobile. . . . From which it follows that the overwhelming majority of our ideas, despite being ideas and acting in us as convictions, are nothing rational but are usages like our language or the handshake; in sum, no less mechanical, unintelligible, and imposed on us than these are. . . . We keep saying things about every subject in the universe on the authority of what people say, as if we were forever drawing on a bank whose balance sheet we have never read. Man commonly lives intellectually on the credit of the society in which he lives, a credit that has never been questioned. Only occasionally, in regard to one point or another, does anyone take the trouble to go over the account, to submit the accepted idea to criticism and reject or readmit it, but this time because he has himself rethought it and examined its foundations.

This last alternative is indeed the program. What then become the obstacles?

> If we contemplate the countless ideas or opinions that forever hover and buzz around us, swarming from what people say, we shall observe that they can be divided into two great classes. Some of them are said as something self-evident and in saying which the speaker is confident from the outset that they will be accepted by what is called "everybody." Other ideas or opinions, on the contrary, are uttered with the more or less definite suggestion that they are not accepted opinions, or sometimes as completely and confessedly opposed to commonly accepted opinions. . . .

> In any case, it is clearly apparent that the person emitting such an opinion is fully conscious that if this private opinion of his is to have any public existence, he or a whole group of like-minded people must affirm it, declare, maintain, support and propagate it. All this becomes even more obvious if we compare it with the expression of opinions that we know or suppose to be accepted by everybody. No one thinks of uttering them as a discovery of his own or as something needing our support. . . . And this is because these opinions are in fact established usages, and "established" means that they do not need support and backing from particular individuals or groups, but that, on the contrary, they impose themselves on everyone, exert their constraint on everyone. It is this that leads me to call them "binding observances." The binding force exercised by these observances is clearly and often unpleasantly perceived by anyone who tries to oppose it. . . . Society, the collectivity, does not contain any ideas that are properly such—that is, ideas clearly thought out on sound evidence. It contains only commonplaces and exists on the basis of these commonplaces. By this I do not mean to say that they are untrue ideas—they may be magnificent ideas; what I do say is that inasmuch as they are observances or established opinions or commonplaces, their possible excellent qualities remain inactive. What acts is simply their mechanical pressure on all individuals, their soulless coercion. Their mode of being in society is extremely like that of Government—they prevail, they rule, they reign.

Does the change we seek require the establishment of another set of binding observances? That may in some measure result, but the goal is to free ourselves of the binding observances now in force, to allow the moral impulses of mankind to have unimpeded flow. If this sounds utopian, we can be sure that critics will make the most of it. But what else is there to do?

REVIEW
SIMONE WEIL

THERE are a few writers of our time who—if they are seriously read—compel an unfamiliar sort of thinking, which is sometimes painful. We mean such writers as Ortega, Simone Weil, and Hannah Arendt. A passage in a book, *Simone Weil*, by Dorothy Tuck McFarland (Ungar, 1983, $11.95), filled with insight into the working of an extraordinary mind, led to this reflection. In her introduction the writer says of her subject:

> She was an independent thinker of genius, and her very independence—her insistence on questioning orthodoxies, her refusal to accept anything simply because it was the reigning opinion of whatever authorities—has placed her outside of much mainstream thinking. It is possible that there has been so much emphasis on what is extreme or absurd in Weil's life because of the challenge she presents to different aspects of mainstream thinking; an approach that on the one hand praises her intellectual gifts and achievements and on the other constructs a grotesque portrait of the woman herself may be an attempt to avoid confronting seriously what she has to say.

What, then, is an orthodoxy? What purpose or good does orthodoxy serve, and why, or under what circumstances, should it be questioned or opposed?

Leaving the etymology of the term aside, it might be said that orthodoxy is a state of comfortable ignorance. We might add that there must be an intuitive element of truth in any orthodoxy that has a large and influential following. But the fact that an orthodoxy cannot contain much more than a quarter or a half truth requires that the system be questioned, and doing this without neglecting or dispensing with the element of truth is often a difficult art. Most revolutionists and reformers don't even attempt it. It is much easier to bludgeon the whole system with proudly iconoclastic blows. That this habit—and it *is* a habit to be observed throughout intellectual and moral history—inevitably prevails in the transitions of a mass society seems self-evident. In some measure we are all subject to this habit, but there are thinkers and writers (among them the ones we have mentioned) who discover this about themselves and make a strenuous effort to eliminate its influence. Doing this well makes them great.

It is likely, then, that the way they proceed is more important than the conclusions they reach, even though one may feel that the conclusions have considerable importance. This way of proceeding is what makes a great book—contemporary, as Robert Hutchins said, in any age. It is the reason why Plato's analysis and criticism of the Sophists is as valuable today as when he wrote it.

But how does a writer discover this way of proceeding, and why does he or she adopt it? The question might perhaps be answered in terms of psychological abstractions, but examples are likely to be more fruitful, since, as William James remarked, our understanding of abstractions only goes as far as our personal experience has given them meaning. How, then, did Simone Weil proceed?

As Dorothy McFarland's book shows, she began both her intellectual and practical life with certain deep-seated convictions. She could not abide injustice or remain indifferent to the injustices she saw about her. Their existence was enough to make her feel *she* suffered the effects. Another assumption came to the surface very early in her life—that truth was but fantasy or vague imagining unless it was applied, unless it was lived to the full extent of one's individual capacity. She believed that a human being is a conscious intelligence animated intrinsically by the desire to know. She believed that the world presents the raw material of knowing. Finally, she was convinced that knowing could result only if a truth was made into an act in and on the world, turning the world into part of our functioning knowledge. This was her conception of progress, and her purpose in life became an undiluted effort to help others to proceed in this way.

Work was Simone Weil's term for dealing with the material world and its laws, which she called Necessity. We forge our being out of this encounter. Drawing on the essays in *Oppression and Liberty*, Dorothy McFarland develops the meaning of work to Simone Weil:

> The man of power, the man whose wishes are carried out by slaves, *is* able to avoid to a large degree the knowledge of the existence of an inexorable and resistant world. Consequently, there is no check on his desires; he enjoys the illusion of a greater freedom than other men, but in reality he is a victim of his own capricious passions; he is "prey to desires to which the clear perception of necessity never comes to assign any limit." For the human being to become what he should be, the encounter with necessity is a sine qua non: "the source of any kind of virtue lies in the shock produced by the human intelligence being brought up against a matter devoid of lenience and of falsity. It is not possible to conceive of a nobler destiny for man than that which brings him directly to grips with naked necessity, without his being able to expect anything except through his own exertions, and such that his life is a continual creation of himself by himself."

Thus work for Simone Weil has not only a physical meaning, but moral and metaphysical significance. As Dorothy McFarland points out, her thought emerges as a coherent and remarkably complete system, based on such principles. Liberty, for example, "involves the freedom to bring the mind to grips with necessity; and this is nothing other than to work, if work is understood not as the carrying out of another's will but the application of one's own thought with a view to effecting changes in the world."

Her experience in working in factories made her realize that the assembly line tended to "dehumanize the unskilled worker, to reduce him or her from a complex being capable of thought, initiative, responsibility, understanding, sensitivity, and fellow feeling to a machine whose only advantage over machines made of metal was that he was capable of carrying out orders." Simone Weil's attitude toward machines and technology was essentially Gandhian:

> Unlike many critics of industrialism who saw the industrial devaluation of work as a consequence of mechanization, Weil was against the system of industrial organization but not antipathetic to machines per se. In the factory, she found "the machines themselves highly attractive and interesting." In an essay written in 1942 and based on her 1935 work experience, she discussed the advantages of versatile automatic machines which, by different cams, could be set up by the worker to carry out a number of different jobs. It was not the machine itself which she regarded as dehumanizing but the relationship between man and machine in which the human being was not the master but the servant: "They (the machines) are not for him a means of turning a piece of metal to a specified form, he is for them a means whereby they will be fed the parts for an operation whose relation to the ones preceding and the ones following remains an impenetrable mystery to him." The primary evil of the factory system, which expresses itself in so many ways, is not that the work is hard or monotonous but that it is set up in such a way as to gut it of all that makes it creative and meaningful. . . . Everything seemed designed to reduce the scope of the worker's consciousness to the bare minimum necessary for him to carry out orders and to make him as much of a thing "as it is possible for a human creature to be." In this Weil saw the very essence of slavery. It was a slavery she not only observed but herself experienced to such a degree that it literally transformed her consciousness: she came to feel herself, even outside the factory, a slave.

It should be remembered that Simone Weil, a full professor of philosophy, chose to work in factories only to experience what the workers had to endure. She felt she could not work for change or reform without personal knowledge of what was to be changed. In the mid-30s she was assigned to a teaching post in Bourges, and there she got to know M. Bernard, the manager of a foundry employing a thousand workers. In his way, he was friendly enough, and a dialogue began between them in which Simone tried to get him to understand "what it was like to be a worker." This went on for some time, but finally she felt obliged to write him: "If I, who am vaguely supposed to have learned to express myself, cannot make myself understood by you, in spite of your goodwill, one asks oneself how any

understanding will ever be reached between the average worker and employer." Dorothy McFarland comments:

> It is clear from Simone Weil's correspondence with Bernard that her experience in the factory had reinforced the conclusion that revolution would not solve the social problem. Her experience in the factory had taught her—much to her surprise—that what present industrial and economic conditions bred in fact was not rebellion but submission. Her association with both the working-class movement and the working masses of the Paris region had left her with the sad conclusion that "the capacity of the French working class not only for revolution but for any action at all is almost nil." And even if a working-class revolution were somehow to come about, she thought, it would not solve the problem, because it would not change the oppressive power relationships that were built into the present system of production: "After a so-called working-class revolution, just as much as before it, the workers at R. [the foundry] will go on obeying passively—so long as the system of production is based on passive obedience."

While what we have quoted gives only a fragmentary view of Simone Weil, it nonetheless shows the integrity and power of her mind. This book, while brief, gives insight into the symmetry of her thought, using all her writings. A concluding passage by Dorothy McFarland will serve as invitation to reading *Simone Weil:*

> As I have attempted to show, she is a writer with a profoundly holistic vision of man and his relationship to the world, one who has recognized and expressed as perhaps no one else in this century the ineluctability of human spiritual needs and the unsatisfied spiritual hungers that have driven twentieth-century men into totalitarianisms of left and right that are no less threatening to the future of civilization now than they were in the 1930s.

COMMENTARY
WORTH NOTICING

FOR centuries, reformers and revolutionists have concentrated on trying to get rid of the bad people who seem to afflict our lives. Throughout the Middle Ages the Church was the aggressive agency. Enemies of the True Faith were identified as the source of evil for humans, and campaigns against these wicked offenders were organized—the Crusades are an example. The search for and punishment of heretics is another. Then, in the eighteenth century, Kings and their minions became the Enemy. We more or less got rid of the kings, or made them powerless, and then, in the nineteenth century, Capitalists were seen as the great offenders. In the twentieth century all right-thinking humans were called upon to do battle against the Totalitarians, and we are still involved in the continuing reflexes of this struggle, although for some the Multinationals are beginning to seem more threatening to our well-being than the Moscow Menace. (Bureaucrats, too, come in for impatient condemnation.)

But now a change is taking place. It seems ever more widely recognized that the way human beings think is the source of our troubles. There are still bad people, but nothing that has been done to get rid of them in the past has had a noticeable result, except, perhaps, to produce more of them. This view is certainly implicit in the quotations in this week's lead article. The common diagnosis is that we suffer mainly from the situations our past efforts at reform (along with our "progress") have created. Our most thoughtful critics waste no time in the identification of scapegoats. The bad people are there, but cleaning them up calls for removing the source of their power, not hunting them down. Human passivity, thoughtlessness, and susceptibility to suggestion make people vulnerable to the wielders of power, and overcoming these qualities is not accomplished by militant campaigns organized by charismatic leaders. People find the best protection in social formations which serve independence and self-reliance instead of reducing these attitudes of mind.

These are ideas which seem to be slowly filtering into the mind of the times. The old complaint, We don't have *time* to wait for a change that comes in this way! is less persuasive. That may be the only actual sign of human progress now on the horizon. It is surely worth noticing.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

KNOWING IS NOT GROWING

FROM the days of the Puritans on, Americans have worried about being *right.* After the Reformation, when the Protestant sects kept on splitting and proliferating, the question of the One True Doctrine kept a great many Christians on edge, anxious to be sure that they belonged to the group that had the truth, and this habit has long survived the issue of religious verity, being transferred to other spheres wherever more than one opinion is possible. Earlier in this century, many people felt that to be *scientific* was the only path to intellectual responsibility, and in the academic world to reveal a tendency to "metaphysical" thinking was an excellent way to lose your job.

This habit, K. C. Cole suggested in *Discover* for last September, is with us yet. He tells about an occasion in which he talked to some junior high school children about Albert Einstein as a creative scientist. At the end of his discourse, a girl in the back of the room asked: "But what if Einstein was wrong?"

This gave Cole opportunity to show the lack of meaning in "right" or "wrong" in scientific inquiry:

> Newton thought that time and space were invariable, and Einstein proved they were not. Yet Newton's "wrong" ideas still are used to chart the path of space shuttles and to place artificial satellites into near-perfect orbits. Apples still fall and the moon still orbits according to Newton's formulas. For that matter, Newton's theories work well for everything in our daily experience. They break down only at extreme velocities (approaching the speed of light), where relativity comes into play, or at extremely small dimensions, where quantum theory takes over, or in the presence of extremely massive objects such as black holes. . . . Indeed, space-time itself only begins to look curved when your measurements cover a large enough territory. In the same way, quantum mechanics and relativity offer a larger perspective on classical physics, taking it into new and uncharted realms. . . .
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> So of course Einstein was wrong. He could not resolve every unanswered riddle, or foresee every possible consequence of his own conclusions. He could not—any more than could Newton—claim to be all-seeing or all-knowing. People who do claim to be completely right about the fundamental nature of things are not in the business of science. Right and wrong in that sense are not questions of science. They are only matters of dogma.

To illustrate the scientific spirit Cole recalled a conversation with the MIT cosmologist, Philip Morrison, who said to him: "When I say the theory is not right, I don't mean that it's wrong. I mean something between right and wrong." In short, there isn't any final certainty in scientific knowledge; our concepts of final truth are and should remain fuzzy, although we have enough certainty to build bridges, erect dams, and make nuclear bombs and other worse than nasty devices.

But such common-sense skepticism wouldn't have worked as a form of practical innocence in a hearing before the Holy Inquisition, nor is it acceptable today in gatherings of people guided by religious dogma. "A science teacher I know," Mr. Cole relates, "found it impossible to argue effectively in favor of evolution because the creationists in his class kept insisting that the 'proof' that evolution was wrong lies in the fact that even its own supporters argue among themselves."

Well, the creationists in the class were at least consistent. They were not prepared to admit that there could be any "evolution" in our understanding of the universe and its forces. They wouldn't have understood Cervantes when he advised, "The road is better than the inn." Actually, there seems a sense in which the present scientific theory of knowledge, so well explained by Mr. Cole, is coming to resemble closely the ancient Indian idea of the Mahamaya—affirming the illusory character of the entirety of the vast structure of the universe. These old philosophers maintained that as our organs of perception are refined, our ideas about what we see before us change quite naturally, and that human evolution is mainly occupied with dissolving one illusion after another. One could say, too, that our "growing up" is largely a process of step-by-step correction of childhood mistakes, which would suggest that maturity is nothing more than a wise recognition of the fact that we shall all "know more

tomorrow," while making the best use of what we know now.

The best apologist we know of for wise uncertainty—and advocate of making do with what we know—is John Holt, who once had a letter from a former student, then in college, in which she wrote how much she envied him. She thought he had "everything all figured out." Holt replied:

> "You could not possibly be more mistaken. The difference between you and me is not that I have everything all taped, it's that I know I don't and I never will, I don't expect to and I don't need to. I expect to live my entire life about as ignorant and uncertain and confused as I am now, and I have learned to live with this, not to worry about it. I have learned to swim in uncertainty the way a fish swims in water."

He then added:

> We are obliged to *act*, in the first place, and in the second place to act intelligently, or as intelligently as possible, in a world in which, as I say, we know very little, in which even if the experts know more than we do, we have no way of knowing which expert knows the most. In other words, we are obliged to live out our lives thinking, acting, judging on the basis of the most fragmentary and uncertain and temporary information.

Indeed, this common sense is not unknown to the theologians, whose definition of Dogma makes the claim that dogmas are teachings we have in the form of revelation from the Deity—teachings which could not be arrived at by the exercise of reason alone. Given the availability of the Dogmas, then, and the requirements of belief in them for Salvation, the case for the Holy Inquisition is complete.

The political version of this claim is the thought-control now practiced in many parts of the world, and by a great many parents who hope to determine how their children will think about both moral and practical questions. In reply to all this, a thoughtful evolutionist could say only that for the purposes of human development, a poor and inadequate solution of one's own for one's problems is better than any other, so long as it is the best that one can do, since for human beings, self-reliance is the first law of growth.

What about lying versus telling the truth? Lao tse had interesting views on this subject. He said in effect that if you are wise enough, nobody can tell you anything but the truth. How so?

Holmes Welch explains in his *The Parting of the Way* (perhaps the best commentary on Taoist philosophy), in a discussion of how a Sage thinks and acts:

> Good and evil being subjective, he can consider another man's criteria as valid as his own. Thus he can take the next step of "believing the truthful man and also believing the liar. Thus all become truthful." Now this is in one sense a solipsist trick—if he believes it, it is true—but it is also a psychological fact. For "it is by not believing people that you turn them into liars." Distrust spreads in a vicious circle. If, for instance, our neighbors distrust us, what is the use of telling them the truth? They deserve to be lied to. And when we lie to them, they will lie to us in return.

Lao tse, Welch maintains, thought that "to tell a *lie* is impossible because every statement has a reason."

> Ask two forty-year-old women their age. The first may answer: "I am forty." She answers this because, in fact, she is forty. The other may answer: "I am thirty-five." The reason she answers this is because she is afraid to lose her looks. From her lips "I am thirty-five" means "I fear old age." The listener who understands the Tao of human nature catches this meaning. Her use of symbols was oblique, but to him she has told the truth. To him meaning is problematical and can be determined neither with certainty nor out of the context of gestures, facial expression, and history.
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> Now this indifference to our concept of "truth" helps the Sage in practicing his technique of human relations. Because he knows that everyone is telling him the truth—if he can only understand—he never becomes angry at their lies and he never finds it necessary to correct them. He does not commit aggression because of a difference of opinion—that great first cause of human misery.

Would that diplomats and policy-makers could learn this lesson! But junior high school children can easily understand it. Mr. Cole might add this to his repertoire on right and wrong the next time he talks to such a class.

FRONTIERS

A Secret of Health

AN ideal book for understanding our changing times is Joseph B. Fabry's *The Pursuit of Meaning* (Harper & Row paperback, $4.95), an exposition in simple language of the therapeutic philosophy of Viktor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist who wrote *From Death-Camp to Existentialism* (Beacon, 1959). Fabry seems faithful in all important respects to the ideas of his teacher, yet he writes about what he has made his own. This seems the best book of all to introduce the teachings of Logotherapy to the general reader.

Labels are almost always misleading. To call a writer a psychiatrist is to classify him, and to name his conceptions Logotherapy is to identify his work as another "school" of psychotherapy or some kind of "ism." In the case of both Dr. Frankl and Dr. Fabry, this is a mistake. Neither of them uses the specialized language of either medical or psychological specialties; they may be doctors, but they write as philosophical human beings. They may be read as thinkers with an intimate grasp, growing out of personal experience, of the inner transitions, difficulties, and longings of the thoughtful people of the present age; as philosophers who have been able to define in general terms the processes and struggles which are characteristic of our time. Health, they show, comes from light much more than from treatment. Mental health results from the pursuit of meaning, which is radically different from the gathering of knowledge as the means to familiar ends.

Dr. Fabry, who practices in Berkeley, California, says in his Introduction:

> Logotherapy is "therapy through meaning," guiding people toward understanding themselves as they are and *could be* and their place in the totality of living. This self-appraisal is not done by wishful thinking, it is based on the realities of life, acknowledging the existence of injustice, suffering, and the certainty of death. Logotherapy is an existential therapy based on actual experience. It helps us have a fresh look at ourselves, our limitations and potentials, failures and visions, our total experiences, with people to encounter, disappointments to overcome, hopes to realize, and tasks to fulfill. This perception is based on the intuitive knowledge that life has meaning, however obscure it may seem at times; that every one is motivated by what Frankl calls "the will to meaning, however repressed it may be; and that everyone has the freedom, however limited, to discover meaning. The belief in meaning, the will to find it, and the freedom to search for it are the tenets of logotherapy. Most people need not be persuaded that meaning exists and that they yearn for it; they merely have to be made aware of what, in the depth of their unconscious, they know to be true.

The definitions afforded by this approach are functional, not doctrinal. Ends or goals are spoken of, not in the terms of a particular religion, although they may have a "religious" quality, nor in terms of science, which cannot be, since none of the sciences has anything to say about purpose or meaning. The quest for meaning is pursued on two levels: "first, as ultimate meaning, a universal order in which every person has a place."

> We see order in religious or secular terms, depending on our world view. In addition to the question "Where do I fit into the whole of life?" the search for meaning raises questions as to our identity, purpose, direction, and tasks: "Who am I? What is my purpose? Where am I going? What ought I to do?" The existence of ultimate meaning cannot be proved, except in the unrepeatable experimentation of living. We can live *as if* meaning, order, purpose, direction, and tasks exist, or we can live *as if* everything were arbitrary and see what alternative points to fulfillment. The proof comes not from ever reaching and holding the meaning of life, which is as impossible as reaching and holding the ever-receding horizon. The proof lies in the fulfillment that comes with the search.

To fill in all these suggestive blanks, Dr. Fabry's book is endlessly anecdotal. As people get down to the nuts and bolts of existence, they encounter experiences and happenings which pose numerous questions. How are they to be answered? Each one must find this out for himself. No "teacher" or "therapist" can give such answers, but he can sometimes point to the fact that the questions are implicit in the experience,

declaring that answers can be found and need to be found, if we are not to waste our lives. No one can do more for another than this.

The truth may be "one," but encounters with it are various. Logotherapy holds that—

> Each person is a unique individual going through a sequence of unrepeatable moments each offering a specific meaning to be recognized and responded to. In most situations the "meaning of the moment" is nothing spectacular—to get up in the morning, eat breakfast, drive safely, do our work. Some moments, however, are subtler: to help a friend, to listen to another person, to make a commitment. . . Occasionally we face moments of vital decisions: to marry, to have a child, to decide on a career, to retire.
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> But Frankl cautions that we cannot invent meanings arbitrarily; we can only discover the meaning inherent in the situation. Often we must make our decision on the basis of insufficient information, but we cannot wait until all the facts are in. We must rely on our conscious knowledge and unconscious intuition and on the voice of our conscience, feeble and prone to error as it is. . . .
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> Within limitations we have a say about who we are and who we want to become. We need never let ourselves be reduced to helpless victims. Consequently, logotherapy—unlike therapies that aim at equilibrium by adjusting patients to society—does not see tensionless life as a therapeutic goal. . . . Life does not owe us pleasure; it does offer meaning. Mental health does not come to those who demand happiness but to those who find meanings; to them happiness comes as a side product. "It must *en*sue," says Frankl. "It cannot be *pur*sued."
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> Logotherapy provides the tools for our pursuit of meaning, keeping dependency on the therapist at a minimum.

There are secrets of human health on nearly every page of this book—perhaps the secrets are also there to read on every page of our lives—if we are able to recognize and accept them. One example is the counsel to turn away from the question—not to demand an answer to: "Why did this happen to me?" The answer may not exist, or we cannot know it. Health lies in saying, "All right—it happened; what can I do now?" In one of his books Frankl says that "human existence is dependent on self-transcendence, survival is dependent on direction." He adds: "And I think this is true not only of the survival of individuals but also for the survival of mankind."

As we have tried to suggest, this is not an ordinary book. But neither is reading it an ordeal. Humor with meaning helps to make survival worth while.