

## REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIMENTAL TEACHING

[This discussion is by Frank Lindenfeld, who teaches sociology, and Peter Marin, who teaches English, at California State College in Los Angeles. It is a paper which was presented on Sept. 1 at the 61st annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, held last week at Miami, Florida. Professors Lindenfeld and Marin hope to obtain foundation funds to carry out their plan of an institute for experimental teaching along the lines described.]

WE recently started to re-examine some basic questions, such as "What is education for?" and "What am I, as a teacher, concerned with doing?" Then we allowed our tentative answers to these questions to radically affect the ways in which we carry out our day-to-day teaching. In consequence, we came to the conclusion that the traditional *methods* of college teaching are not particularly helpful in doing what we'd like to do—indeed, they seem more suited to technical training than to liberal education—and we have begun to experiment with alternatives. As we discovered when we began doing some reading on experimental teaching methods, our ideas are not particularly original; we are not the first to have tried the methods we will describe; they are, however, sufficiently unknown to warrant attempts such as ours to present them to a wider audience.

We began with the simple observation that professors do not appear to be "reaching" the great majority of their students except in a superficial way. Most students accept their education the way they accept rain. They would rather avoid it if they could, but when they can't, they endure it. When demands become too great, they harden their defenses so that they will be untouched and unmoved, and their learning rarely involves those parts of the self usually engaged in real changes of behavior or thought. In the classroom, as we have all seen, the professor usually does most of the "work" (talking) while

students take notes and try to discover what he wants them to say or do.

What students are being trained in, in such situations, is a kind of quiet intellectual schizophrenia. Their classrooms tend to exclude their individual experience and perception, and substitute for it a kind of acceptable, "prefabricated" knowledge. Categories of abstraction are handed to them whole and they have no chance to generate them themselves or test them in activity.<sup>1</sup> Unable to use their learning in some direct way, students tend to ignore or to forget the *content* of college courses as soon as their exams are finished. What they remember instead (what is "learned," in terms of behavior) is the *structure* of the class and the ideas implicit in it: the professor as unassailable authority, students as passive observers of trained "performers," anxiety about grades and verbalization, feelings of unimportance, boredom and isolation.

Student apathy is encouraged by the very structure of our colleges and their relation to the communities they serve. For most students, going to college is the means to some other end, an end that usually has only tenuous connections to the traditional ideas of "liberal education." They take courses only to get grades and enough degrees to leave courses behind forever. Very little of what they encounter in their education seems to have relevance for them. Little of what they learn involves the development of personality or the expanding of what one can only call their individual "existential" horizons. The typical college course is for most of them only another hurdle in the way of their obtaining the middle and upper status jobs in our society.

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<sup>1</sup> See Abraham Maslow's criticisms of education in *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).

The lack of student motivation reflects the fact that most colleges and universities (except perhaps the very best and most expensive) are not run primarily for their benefit, and students know it. The schools are processing factories in which young people can be trained to fit into jobs or graduate schools after commencement. In these "factories," the nature of the curriculum tends to be determined less by what the students want or even need, and more by what the graduate schools, the government bureaus, and the corporations seem to want of the college graduate.

We believe, however, that colleges *should* be run for students. We feel that the primary function of colleges is education; and that colleges should help students to fulfill their own inherent potentialities for growth. Further, the function of teachers should be to encourage students to discover their own interests and to do and understand those things they are interested in. This viewpoint, conservative though it seems, has a number of seemingly revolutionary implications. It means, as Rogers<sup>2</sup> has pointed out, that we would do away with two of the chief ingredients of college education as it is currently practiced: lectures and expositions which are imposed by the professor; and the grading of students by professors.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, we might change our conception of curriculum, moving from disciplines and specialties to a more "problem centered" and interdisciplinary approach. Here, in more detail, are a few general suggestions.

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<sup>2</sup> See Carl Rogers', On *Becoming a Person* (Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> The system of grades and credits as it exists in most colleges is actually a block to education: students become anxious over their performance on examinations, and they are led by the system into a position in which the grade becomes more important than the knowledge it supposedly stands for. Besides encouraging cut-throat competitiveness, the grading system implicitly makes more important those aspects of learning that can be "measured," i.e., the accumulation and recitation of factual matter. It ignores *qualitative* changes.

One of our fundamental ideas is the "open field" class.<sup>4</sup> It is a "structureless" class which is nothing more nor less than the persons within it and what they bring, individually, into the classroom. Except for the most general definition there is no preconceived set or task. The teacher neither demands nor disciplines; the students' interests are allowed to focus naturally; what occurs, ideally, is that the students *reveal* through themselves and their activities, something of the world as it exists around them and in them, and their learning and directions radiate out from this center of interest and need. At the same time, the students confront the teacher, who aids the learning process by the example of his passionate concern with the subject matter and by acting as a resource upon whom the class can draw.

Perhaps it will help to discuss this in terms of education seen as "problem-solving." A good deal of talk and experimentation is going on now in academic circles based on the assumption that it is more important for the student to develop the practical intellectual skills of analysis, understanding, etc., than to simply amass factual data. The intention is generally to involve him totally in the intellectual "process" and to train the mind as an active and sensitive instrument. All of this makes sense to us, but the only fundamental difference in our approach is our assumption that such methods work best when the students are allowed to discover and define "problems" *for themselves*, or when such problems are allowed to emerge naturally. To *provide* these "problems" for students short-circuits the nature of intellect at a basic level; it trains the students in "performance" but tends to fragment what appears to be the natural relationship of experience and learning. It is precisely this relationship that we mean to preserve, and this can only be done by basing the education and training of students on *their* individual and collective existential

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<sup>4</sup> This concept was first developed by Peter Marin in classes concerned with creative' writing, rhetoric and literature.

conditions, in rooting their intellectual life in the actualities of their relationships to the world around them. In the "open field" class we encourage the emergence and acknowledgement of these relationships, for it is only after they appear—introduced by the students themselves—that learning begins to become the vital activity we would all like it to be.

We view the process of education as involving a flow from experience to perception to abstraction. Instead of starting out with high level abstractions such as "social class," or "democracy," we begin more directly with students' experiences. This helps the obvious paradox of intellectual discussion of concepts like "freedom" in an authoritarian atmosphere. Our open field classes arise naturally from what the students are and what the teacher is as they enter the room. They are based on the experience of the participants, and thus start out from a real as opposed to an artificial base.

Some support for this notion of "open field" classes can be found implicit in the work of Eric Erikson. In his *Young Man Luther*, he suggests strongly that an individual experiences *in himself* and his personal development much of what is occurring in the culture around him. If this is so, then the individual contains within himself—as a splinter, a microcosm of his own time—many elements of the world about which he is learning. To a great extent he is that world, and we believe that it is possible to bring his experience into the classroom, and for his learning about the world to begin with his confrontation of what *he* is and what has already happened to him. His concerns with more formal disciplines and theoretical knowledge will radiate outward from his investigations of his own experience.

Perhaps a good example of this is the concept of "alienation." Students, as we all know, hear a good deal about this "condition" of modern man. But their understanding of the concept and the condition to which it refers is much richer if discussion of it has emerged *naturally*, as a result

of their confrontation of their own experiences. They may not have the word at first to describe what they are talking about, and the teacher may then want to supply it, but we feel that he should supply the word and the abstract concept only *after* the students have provided the opportunity.

If the concept comes *first*, the students will apply it like a "title" to their experience without ever letting the experience itself emerge—and their knowledge will tend to remain "abstract," without roots in their personal experience. But if the experience or condition comes first, the concept becomes personally meaningful; it becomes a tool of understanding. What is *most* important is that the students and teacher preserve the relationship between subjective experience and more objective descriptions of experience. That is, the class must be flexible enough to concern itself with whatever enters the room through the students; and whatever the students bring into the room is the fit "subject matter" of the classroom, for it reveals what a part of the world is, even if they bring in apparently irrelevant matters.

In our experiments with classes in Sociology and in English we have found that, given this "formless freedom," students may respond in a variety of ways. Some, of course, do not appear outwardly to benefit from the experience: they remain hostile, or silent, or worry that they are not learning what they are "supposed" to learn. Others, hard pressed by demands for papers, exams and performance in other classes, use the class as a place to relax, and find some of the human contact and warmth there that appears to be missing in many of their other classes.

But for many students the "open field" class seems to stimulate the process of learning. The typical situation is that there will be a long period of apparently aimless wandering in which the class moves first in one direction, and then in another. Sometimes this period lasts most of the semester; but at some time, there comes a sudden burst of energies and growth of interest which can flower into intense learning experiences. Students then

begin to assume the responsibility for what occurs in the classroom and in their own education. They come face to face with the difficulties and the joy in making collective and private decisions and distinctions which directly affect their own activities.

Students do not always learn from this method: but we feel that no matter what we did, we could not possibly do any worse than in courses where students are presented with facts and theories which they must assimilate in order to regurgitate them on examinations. Although systematic evidence is not yet available on this, we believe that most students—not only the bright ones—*learn more quickly in less structured situations*: for such situations tend to be more real to the extent that they issue forth from the students and are not imposed from the outside. Consequently, the students enter more freely into them, participate more fully, and—since they are more completely involved—tend to learn more quickly, in a less abstract and bookish way, the subjects on hand.

There is still another virtue of these "open field" classes. Without the usual predetermination, more things happen in the classroom than one had anticipated or imagined. Experience has shown us in such situations that students are capable of establishing for themselves a variety of classroom activities that surpass in richness anything a single teacher is able to suggest. The "open field" permits accidents to happen and encourages spontaneity. Events in the classroom begin to form a progression; each day is different, and the class assumes a fluidity and organic character that college courses, because of their rigid structures, often lack.

Finally, such "open field" classes imply a great trust of the teacher for the student, an acceptance of *whatever* he is. It is precisely this acceptance that is necessary in education. When it exists, students gradually learn to trust themselves and their spontaneous reactions, to be more open and free in the classroom, to respond more

completely and thus more intelligently to whatever happens around them. This, in turn, contributes to their capacity to operate in the classroom, to "act" in a variety of environments. They tend to assume more and more responsibility for their education *outside* of the classroom. Thus hopefully they tend to become more effective as students and richer human beings.

A perfectly valid criticism of the "open field" classes is that for the most part they lack any clear focus, they involve largely superficial chit-chat, and so on. This, it is true, is one of the things that happens at the beginning, and for this reason we feel that students need more time to follow the inclinations which they slowly find for themselves. We think that students exposed to an educational environment in which they are able to get back in touch with themselves, in which they are able to find connections between their own experience and the college curriculum, will blossom out in very creative directions. All they need is the opportunity. This means that one "open field" class in isolation is perhaps not enough. Perhaps what *is* needed is the chance for students' interests to become clear and for them to arrive at some idea of the questions they would like their own education to answer.

Therefore, we view the open field classes as the gateway to a series of studies in depth. The class, or its continuation the following semester, leads into a situation in which a highly motivated group of students is trying to find answers to questions important to them. If the professor has been working along with the students and participating in the group, the questions will likely also be of importance to him. This is the perfect situation for the class to become a research seminar. In sociology, for example, the way is not open for the class to move outside of the classroom into the field to observe, to gather information, and to try to weld this into some kind of intellectual synthesis. Instead of sterile "academic" exercises, the students would be involved in real research projects of interest to

themselves and to their professor; or in community-action projects in which instead of only talking about the things they are studying, they try to put them into practice. This might lead to a work-study program in which students would start doing jobs they thought were interesting and needed doing, whether or not there was anybody around to "pay" them. Thus a class in the sociology of education might help to run a kindergarten which could be continued by students who take the class the following year; a class in urban sociology might try its hand at community organizing or an actual project in urban planning; and so forth.

By their very nature, the studies in depth which grow out of the open field classes would tend to be interdisciplinary. That is, they would attempt to deal with specific problems and questions from as many angles as appear relevant. The real world is one, after all, and does not consist merely of "sociological aspects," "psychological aspects," or "economic aspects." Thus, the "open field" approach tends to render unworkable the "grid" or "parallel" approach now dominant in education.

The limitations of the attempt by individual professors to push innovations in teaching are only too apparent. While higher education may help to bring about changes in other areas of our society, changes in the structure of our colleges and universities come about more slowly than in most other institutions. If we are even a little bit successful in our experimental classes, we tend to make students less comfortable with the other classes they must take. To move back and forth from "student centered" to "professor centered" classes is something of a strain, for students must not let their newly found freedom creep too much into their other classes, or they may be penalized by getting low grades from professors who hold more to traditional procedures.

In our secular, achievement-oriented schools the very symbols of achievement—grades—tend to be viewed as sacred. Faculty tend to be hired

on a rigid, departmentalized basis. And the whole structure is set up in such a way that professors come to have a vested interest in the retention of the existing system.

To propose changes is to threaten the self-image and the comfortable working habits of other professors. Under the unstructured methods, professors would no longer be able to rely on the security of a set of established lecture notes; they might be forced to re-evaluate their relationship with their students, and to come into much closer contact and communication with them. Thus, for many of them, going into an unstructured classroom is likely to be frightening. And the unstructured methods may also be attacked on the grounds that one is not really doing justice to the subject matter. This criticism is probably valid, but only if you accept the frame of reference of college as a place in which we pour the "content" of courses into the relatively empty minds of students and give them examinations to see how full they are before their knowledge evaporates. Harder to deal with are questions such as whether one is still "really" a sociologist, or psychologist, etc., when opening up one's courses to this free flow of interests.

We have come to realize that in order to allow us to have the maximum chance of success with student-centered methods, it would be desirable to set up some kind of structure within our college in which students would be exposed to a more consistent environment. For this reason, we have proposed the establishment of a small two-year experimental institute at our school. Such a "college within the college" would allow new ideas such as ours to be tried out systematically in a supportive setting.

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## *REVIEW*

### IN PRAISE OF SOCRATES

IF Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (discussed last week in "Children") illuminates and justifies Plato's opposition to the "poets," Leonard Nelson's *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy* (Dover paperback, 1965, \$2.00) is a brilliant defense of Socratic-Platonic methods of teaching as illustrated in the Dialogues. It is also a defense of philosophy as an independent discipline, grounded in Reason or the mind itself. A neo-Kantian who found in Jacob Fries the best exemplar of the critical method of Socrates and Kant, Nelson was above all a teacher. Like Socrates, he insisted that his students think for themselves. Like Socrates, he began with commonplace matters of daily experience and pursued without compromise the question of what we really know, as distinguished from what we think we know. He never deserts this method, no matter what the temptations.

A foreword by Brand Blanshard, of Yale, tells a little about this "remarkable German philosopher with the very English name":

As for Nelson personally, what impresses one first is the variety of achievements he crowded into a life that was far too short. He died at forty-five, leaving behind him a three-volume work on the foundations of ethics and politics, substantial books on jurisprudence and on the theory of knowledge; a treatise, still unpublished, on the history of metaphysics; and a great many essays on mathematics, epistemology, and educational theory. So far he sounds like many another sedulous German professor. But he was more than that. He was moulded to the stuff of which reformers are made. In accordance with the principles of an exacting ethics he lived with Spartan simplicity and Stoic self-discipline. He practiced as well as preached new methods of teaching, and in order to carry out more freely his educational and social principles, he founded the Walkemuhle School near Cassel. One of its chief aims was to train its pupils in enlightened and liberal citizenship. Not unnaturally it fell under the ban of Hitler and had to be transferred to Denmark and later to England.

Nelson was an ardent internationalist, an outspoken opponent of power politics, and an eloquent advocate of the sort of law, domestic and international, that is based on a common reason. On July 31, 1914, the day before the outbreak of the First World War, he ended his long cycle of lectures on the philosophy of politics with a plan and a plea for a League of Nations. "The glory of a nation," he said, "like that of an individual, does not consist in things which one can grasp with one's hands or of which one can deprive another, but consists only in the innate spirit of justice." The lecture could not at the time appear in print, but Nelson did succeed in publishing in the midst of the war a fearless book on *Jurisprudence without Justice*, in which he indicted all legal systems that contribute to the cult of power. Though he did not live into the Hitler regime, his influence definitely did. One of his students writes: "All Nelson's pupils who remained in Germany were engaged, as long as they were not imprisoned, in underground or other illegal work against Nazism." His courage as well as his philosophy left its mark.

Nelson declares for the possibility of a rational metaphysics. Psychology contributes the fact of this possibility, while philosophical "deduction"—the elucidation of the capacity of the mind to establish first principles for ethics, by means of critical method—becomes the tool of metaphysical thinking.

The basis of Nelson's contention that a rational metaphysics is possible lies in Hilbert's contribution to axiomatics. By a similar method, Nelson shows, Fries (1773-1843) exposed "the concrete fact of the *knowledge* of these truths," using empirical, "*i.e.*, psychological modes of knowledge." In his paper, "Philosophy and Axiomatics," Nelson remarks:

The development of the philosophy of mathematics gives us also the solution to an ancient riddle, it affords an answer to a question first raised by Plato. . . . It is a fact that Plato already applies the idea of critical method, which is to be found, symbolically formulated, in his doctrine of "reminiscence," to mathematical knowledge and in this way succeeds in presenting with complete clarity the problem of critical mathematics, namely, the problem of critically investigating proofs in order to discover axioms.

Nelson's emphasis on the fact that the reality of metaphysical first principles is derived from psychology reminds one of what William James said in *The Principles of Psychology*:

At present psychology is in the condition of physics before Galileo and the laws of motion, of chemistry before Lavoisier and the notion that the mass is preserved in all reactions. The Galileo and the Lavoisier of psychology will be famous men indeed when they come, as come they some day surely will, or past successes are no index to the future. When they do come, however, the necessities of the case will make them "metaphysical."

We must now give evidence of Nelson's appreciation of what Socrates was about. He begins by acknowledging the "faults" of the Socratic dialogue:

Every intelligent college freshman reading Plato's dialogues raises the objection that Socrates, at the most decisive points, engages in monologues and that his pupils are scarcely more than yes men—at times, as Fries remarks, one does not even see how they arrived at the "yes." In addition to these didactic defects, there are grave philosophical errors, so that we often find ourselves concurring in the dissenting opinions of some of the participants.

In order to reach a conclusion concerning truth and error, the valuable and the valueless, let us take another look at Plato's account. No one has appraised Socrates' manner of teaching and its effect on his pupils with greater objectivity or deeper knowledge of human nature. Whenever the reader is moved to protest against long-windedness or hair-splitting in the conversations, against the monotony of the deductions against the futility of the battle of words, a like protest arises at once from some participant in the dialogue. How openly Plato allows the pupils to voice their displeasure, their doubt, their boredom—just think of the railing of Calicles in the *Gorgias*. He even has conversation breaking off because the patience of the participants is exhausted, and the reader's judgment is by no means always in favor of Socrates. But does this criticism reveal anything except the sovereign assurance with which Plato stands by the method of his teacher for all its shortcomings? Is there any better proof of confidence in the inherent value of a cause than to depict it with all its imperfections, certain that it will nevertheless prevail? Plato's attitude toward his teacher's work is like that displayed toward Socrates, the man, in the

well-known oration by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. There, by contrasting the uncouth physical appearance of Socrates with his inner nature, he makes his noble personality shine forth with greater radiance and compares him to a silenus who bears within him the mark of the gods.

After some discussion of the difficulty of capturing, in writing, the spirit of authentic dialogue—as instances of this art he cites Dostoevsky's story of the Grand Inquisitor and the opening passages of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*—Nelson points to the folly of offering in writing "the solution along with the problem." This is no faithful reproduction of the sparks of inspiration that may take place in conversation. It produces, as Socrates says in the *Phaedrus*, "the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom." Nelson quotes Plato's Seventh Epistle on the uselessness of verbal exposition of ultimate matters. It may act as an "obstacle to insight"—seducing people into the naive notion that, as Socrates says further on, "anything in writing will be clear and certain." What then is the virtue of the method of Socrates? Nelson answers:

One achievement is universally conceded to him: that by his questioning he leads his pupils to confess their ignorance and thus cuts through the roots of their dogmatism. This result, which indeed cannot be *forced* in any other way, discloses the significance of the dialogue as an instrument of instruction. The lecture, too, can stimulate spontaneous thinking, particularly in more mature students; but no matter what allure such stimulus may possess, it is not *irresistible*. Only persistent pressure to speak one's mind, to meet every counter question, and to state the reasons for every assertion transforms the power of that allure into an irresistible compulsion. This art of *forcing* minds to *freedom* constitutes the first secret of the Socratic method. . . .

Socrates was the first to combine with confidence in the ability of the human mind to recognize philosophical truth the conviction that this truth is not arrived at through occasional bright ideas or mechanical teaching but that only planned, unremitting, and consistent thinking leads us from darkness into its light. Therein lies Socrates' greatness as a philosopher. His greatness as a pedagogue is based on another innovation: he made his pupils do their own thinking and introduced the

interchange of ideas as a safeguard against self-deception.

In the light of this evaluation, the Socratic method, for all its deficiencies, remains the only method for teaching philosophy. Conversely, all philosophical instruction is fruitless if it conflicts with Socrates' basic methodic requirements.

Included in this method is the insistent stripping away of illusions, of false ideas of knowledge, until a certain desperation ensues. Meno tells Socrates he is like the torpedo fish which benumbs those who touch it. Socrates answers that his own doubts inspire doubts in others. And when Meno asks how a doubter can teach anything, Socrates makes his great reply: "Because the soul should be able to recollect all that she knew before."

This is the Socratic declaration of philosophic independence. Dogmas are not needed for the instruction of man, and their use makes Socrates' work long and burdensome, for he must undo the indoctrinations of the ages before authentic philosophizing can even begin.

While Nelson is wary of "mysticism," as distinguished from the pure rationalism in which he is interested, the offense of mysticism, as he sees it, is its desertion of ethics for the development of "inner powers." But since a true mysticism would rather strengthen ethical conviction, and would never be contemptuous of the unprejudiced sanctions of reason, this objection does not seem important. The whole strength of Nelson's position, from which he never recedes, is his insistence that morality must be created and supported by rational understanding. We conclude with a passage from his paper, "World-View of Ethics and Religion":

The obligation we call duty is not a fact but a law. We cannot gain knowledge of laws by observation as we do of facts; we apprehend laws only through thinking. If, therefore, there is any such thing as a moral law at all, then we can act morally only on the basis of our own insight. Morality stands or falls with the possibility of personal insight into duty. Any command imposed by an outside will is entirely beyond the range of our insight. We can take

cognizance of the claim of this will as fact; we can even submit ourselves to it; but never can such a will establish its validity. If the autonomy of ethics is done away with, if, in other words, the law of duty springs from a higher will, then it is the law of duty itself that is done away with. An "ought" because another wills it, is a contradiction in terms.

## *COMMENTARY* **SOCRATIC METHOD**

THERE are interesting parallels between the "open field" teaching described in this week's lead article and the account of the Socratic method given by Leonard Nelson (see Review). The writers of our lead article say:

A perfectly valid criticism of the "open field" classes is that for the most part they lack any clear focus, they involve largely superficial chit-chat, and so on. This, it is true, is one of the things that happens at the beginning, and for this reason we feel that students need more time to follow the inclinations which they slowly find for themselves. . . . We view the process of education as involving a flow from experience to perception to abstraction. Instead of starting out with high-level abstractions such as "social class" or "democracy," we begin more directly with students' experiences.

Defending Socratic method, Nelson writes:

The teacher of philosophy who lacks the courage to put his pupils to the test of perplexity and discouragement not only deprives them of the opportunity to develop the endurance needed for research but also deludes them concerning their capabilities and makes them dishonest with themselves.

Now we can discern one of the sources of error that provoke the familiar unjust criticisms of the Socratic method. This method is charged with a defect which it merely reveals and which it must reveal to prepare the ground on which alone the continuation of serious work is possible. It simply uncovers the harm that has been done to men's minds by dogmatic teaching.

Is it a fault of the Socratic method that it must take time for such elementary matters as ascertaining what question is being discussed or determining what the speaker intended to say about it? It is easy for dogmatic instruction to soar to higher regions. Indifferent to self-understanding, it purchases its illusory success at the cost of more and more deeply rooted dishonesty. It is not surprising, then, that the Socratic method is compelled to fight a desperate battle for integrity of thought before it can turn to larger tasks. . . . Abstraction must have something to abstract from. . . . Just as Socrates took pains to question locksmiths and blacksmiths and made their

activities the first subject of discussion with his pupils, so every philosopher ought to start out with the vernacular and develop the language of his abstract science from its pure elements.

Obviously, there is illustrious precedent for what Profs. Lindenfeld and Marin are attempting. Another sort of parallel may be drawn between the initial "aimlessness" of "open field" teaching and the loss of security produced in Meno by Socrates' relentless questioning. One also recalls the desperate sincerity of the stripped-down or "shipwrecked" man, spoken of by Ortega, and the inevitable reduction of the Zen novice to feelings of total ignorance. Something of this sort seems essential in all real learning.

# CHILDREN

## . . . and Ourselves

### MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

IN the *Nation* for June 27, William Ryan, a psychologist who teaches in the Harvard Medical School Laboratory of Community Psychiatry, writes on the inadequacy of the means available to help the five million emotionally disturbed children in the United States. Of these five million, who are all handicapped to some degree by their ills, less than a fifth have any contact at all with a psychiatric agency or mental health professional, and of these only about a third, Dr. Ryan says, can be said to receive anything resembling treatment. In some cases, the "treatment" may actually do harm:

Eighteen thousand children are today shuffling or racing through the wards and corridors of public mental hospitals; many are not even separated from the adult psychotics, and only a fraction receive help that goes much beyond food and a roof. We are still putting children in snake pits.

Speaking of the 3.5 million children who are beneficiaries of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, or are receiving public child welfare help—of whom between a half a million and a million are disturbed—Dr. Ryan remarks that the services to their needs are by young women who, although often practical and conscientious, are lacking in training and over-burdened with work. Further:

. . . meager public assistance grants, cruelly and grudgingly given, doubtless produce such demoralizing effects for many that the AFDC program itself can logically be considered a severe mental health hazard. In other settings—and this is most often true for children being seen in private case work agencies—children are treated with at least as great skill as they would be in a psychiatric clinic.

The fate of most falls between these two extremes. For example, some disturbed children who are in foster homes are merely fed and taken care of, with decency but without much understanding; others have unusual foster parents, supported by skilled case workers, and they are loved and cherished and

substantially healed; still others are damaged through being shifted about from the tense battlefield of one home to the rejecting wasteland of another. There are children, battered and distressed by a life of poverty and rejection, who have been rescued and made whole by a worker in a settlement house. Others have been in the same building for a day or for many days, and have departed still empty and hurting.

Severely disturbed, even psychotic children are to be found in institutions for delinquents, in schools for the retarded, in group homes for neglected children, even, unbelievably, in county jails. Some of these places are modern, warm and helpful. Too many are overcrowded and understaffed, and every state has at least one barren building that fits the description of a terrifying orphanage from the pages of Dickens.

The point of Dr. Ryan's article is that, in general, the psychiatric disciplines concentrate on the internal factors affecting the disturbed, whereas it is becoming plain that in fact the environmental situation is largely to blame for the condition of these children: "There is persuasive evidence that crowded slum housing, racial discrimination, unemployment and other concomitants of poverty have a direct and devastating effect on the emotional well-being of its victims." The primary task of the new Joint Commission on the Mental Health of Children, Dr. Ryan says, should be to consider where renewed effort should be made:

Almost the entire output of the mental health professions is devoted to treatment; essentially no heed is given to prevention. Such preventive activity as does go on is furnished by social welfare, citizen and public health interests, is largely limited to advice about raising children and lowering tensions, and has continued over the years with no evaluation as to its usefulness.

Should we continue this pattern, spending most of our limited funds on efforts to salvage the deeply damaged children who constitute our early psychiatric casualties? Or is it more sensible to try to prevent these casualties, which now occur in such large numbers that we cannot begin to deal effectively with them?

Moving to possible remedies, Dr. Ryan says:

What has not been tried on any large scale is straight-forward correction of the environmental conditions that produce stress and deprivation. But granted that concern about slums, segregated schools and unemployed fathers hanging on street corners fits into a mental health context, how is it to be converted to action? Psychiatric professionals are trained to treat emotional disturbance, not social conditions. . . . Mental health is reflected in drives toward self-realization, mastery of the environment, and coping with one's destiny. . . . during times of civil rights demonstrations, particularly in Southern cities, when members of the Negro community are vigorously engaged in protest activity—in other words, when they are engaged in "mentally healthy" activity aimed at mastering their own fate—the incidence of crime, family disputes and other behavioral pathology decreases dramatically.

To apply this principle to mental health programs means that treating pathology would become only half the mental health job. The balance would consist of creating and influencing situations to provide occasions and supports for the disturbed—and those most likely to become disturbed—to cope with their own environment, to play an active role in influencing the conditions that affect their own lives. One could even conceive of such a radical proposal as mental health programs that encouraged the "maximum feasible participation" of the emotionally disturbed.

For children this would mean not only generating more psychotherapy but also working for conditions in the classroom, the family and the neighborhood that foster responsible, self-directing freedom. . . . A mental health impact on education would have to focus on the slum school, with its irrelevant curriculum, the condescending attitudes of its teachers, and its dull and rigid atmosphere. At the same time, something must be done about the smothering, brainwashing, grade-drenched atmosphere of the "good" suburban schools, one of whose products is the invisible insanity of the cool and agreeable mathematics Ph.D. who is planning out his "academic" career in operations research for the Pentagon, calculating the parameter of megatons and megadeaths in a paranoid fantasy of mass destruction. The new Joint Commission must speak about the conditions that encourage mental health as well as the means of patching together the casualties of mental illness.

To go with this fundamental criticism, and Dr. Ryan's, alas, all-too-utopian proposals (you

might as well ask the government to bow out of Vietnam in behalf of the mental health of *all* the people in the country), we strongly recommend a careful reading of "The First Street School," by George Dennison, in the July *Liberation* (for a single copy send 75 cents to *Liberation* at 5 Beekman Street, New York, N.Y. 10038). This is the story, by one of its teachers, of a school started on the lower east side of New York, by Mabel Chrystie, a woman who saw the need for "an antidote to the dehumanization of the public school system." The way Mr. Dennison tells it, starting such a school is a fairly easy thing to do. And the rewards, as he describes them, are immeasurable. This is a long article with close attention to theoretical questions (including some searching criticism of Jerome S. Bruner's *Toward a Theory of Instruction*), yet all the discussion is grounded on classroom experience, with much detail of actual teaching and accounts of personal growth of the children. It is a kind of writing about education that can lead to personal action—people can themselves do something about the needs Mr. Dennison describes. You don't have to wait for the reeducation of the entire country to start a school of this sort. As Mr. Dennison concludes his long account of teaching at the First Street School:

Rather than give more details of this kind, however, I would like simply to stress the fact that rapid spurts in learning, and the great changes in personality and happiness were not dependent on teaching equipment, elaborate methods of instruction, or an imposing architectural facade. All that is needed is a little space, good teachers, and abundant consideration for the children. These don't cost much money. They don't require more research. They are available all over the city of New York.

## *FRONTIERS*

### Progress Report on the "Thaw"

THE struggles of Soviet psychologists to pursue their inquiries without guidance from the Watch and Ward officials of the Communist ideology make an interesting study of what may happen to a society which allows philosophical questions to be settled by political fiat. The most crucial question for politics, as for any other field of social action, is the nature of man. Yet politics has no competence for settling this question, which belongs to another realm of inquiry. If the leaders of an ideological society persist in declaring that the nature of man has been settled and is *known*, once and for all, they go far beyond the expedient unity needed during the crisis of a revolution, and must expect the symptoms of ideological heresy to appear wherever and whenever freedom of thought is exercised.

Freudian psychology, for example, is banned in Soviet Russia because it represents principles for understanding human behavior without reference to the doctrines of dialectical materialism. Too much is at stake for orthodox Marxists to allow application of theories which ignore the principle upon which their entire society is held to be based. So, no psychoanalysis. But this, as Lewis Feuer has observed, brings extreme embarrassment in relation to the now admitted crimes of Stalin. Feuer, an American sociologist, pointed out (*New York Times*, Aug. 20, 1963):

If they [the Russians] attribute the manifold occurrences under his [Stalin's] dictatorship to the underlying social system, their explanation will be a Marxist one, but it will constitute an indictment of the Soviet foundation. On the other hand, if they attribute these occurrences to Stalin's personal traits, his fears, his persecution complex, their explanation will make the unconscious forces of the individual paramount, and this will move them to be "Freudian" despite themselves.

And why, moreover, were the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet people themselves in such an irrational frame of mind as to allow themselves to be

guided by the all-dominant neurotic personality of their time? Soviet thinkers, prohibited from dealing with the great contradiction of Soviet Society, are also vaguely aware that if they did so, the whole Leninist theoretical structure might be shaken.

Another phase of psychology in the Soviet Union is kept track of by the *Journal of Parapsychology*, now published by the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man (College Station, Durham, N.C.) headed by J. B. Rhine. While Soviet scientists who dare to investigate in the direction of a supposed "non-physical" reality at once draw the fire of metaphysical Marxists who "know" that telepathic and other ESP phenomena are simply impossible, by reason of their contradiction to the materialist dogma, parapsychological research nonetheless goes on in the U.S.S.R. MANAS for June 23 of last year drew on material translated from the *Moscow Literary Gazette* (published in the *Journal of Parapsychology* for March, 1965) in which a Russian psychiatrist warned his colleagues and countrymen that if the facts of clairvoyance, as shown by his experiments, are ignored, "this will doubtless be the open door through which religious faith rushes in." A further report on Soviet Parapsychology appears in the *Journal of Parapsychology* for March of this year, which reprints from the *Hamburg Sonntag* for Jan. 23 an article by Georg Shafer, entitled "In Defiance of the Ideologists: Parapsychology in the Soviet Union."

This writer offers a brief survey of Russian attitudes toward parapsychology. Before the "thaw" it was held to be "an apologetic instrument of disenthroned religion." After Stalin's exposure, however, the stultification of science by the thought-control of Marxist-Leninist ideology began to be openly discussed. A writer in *Nova Cultura* for October, 1956, is quoted on the dilemma of research workers who find themselves unable to fit their results into the jig-saw puzzle of "Marxist-Leninist conceptions." If an investigator "places them within the prescribed lines he is guilty of dogmatism; if he acts on his own

initiative, he is accused of subjectivism and deviationism." This policy led, in psychology, he continued, "to the complete disappearance of the creative spirit, to Communist arrogance, to the camouflaging of ignorance behind a curtain of ideological phraseology." Sharing this view, a Professor Antonov spoke of Soviet psychology as being "caught as a blind man in the mechanisms of Pavlov's theories." He argued that "if one believes that the reflex process is all there is to psychic process, one is following unquestioningly the pattern of vulgar materialism." An orthodox colleague was quick to warn against the implications of this view:

"If Antonov assumes psychic activity (thinking or consciousness) to be a process characteristic of brain activity, then this assumption leads to the unquestioning recognition of a motion which has no material basis. If we go one step further then psychology has once again sneaked in the idea of the soul, for if we assume the processes of consciousness to be different from, and higher than, the physiological processes of the nerve connections in the brain, we are bound to accept the soul as being the bearer of these processes."

However, the tide of open interest in parapsychology, having begun to rise in the U.S.S.R., can no longer be restrained. At the end of 1964, Prof. W. P. Tugarinov urged that parapsychology be recognized as a special study, pointing out that questions about this field are continually asked by students. Answering his critics, Tugarinov declared:

Preconceived ideas and ideological prejudices are the greatest obstacles to our work. First we will consider the question of telepathy. As is very well known, for centuries now there has existed in our nation the conviction that there are such things as premonitions, clairvoyance, and convergences of thoughts among people having close personal relations etc. The problem is to distinguish reality from preconceived ideas and opinions. . . . Whenever this topic is put up for discussion, one hears again and again: "I don't believe in it" or "I do believe in it." But is this thing which we are trying to put on a solid foundation, a matter of belief? Above all, the question is, to examine by experimental scientific methods whether these phenomena exist or not.

Should we find even *fragments* of them confirmed, then we ought to devote all our efforts to clarifying the rational basis of these phenomena. The opponents of telepathy often argue thus: "Telepathy is impossible." But nothing can be done on this argument alone. This can be challenged with the fact that the "impossible" often becomes possible before our eyes. . . . The psyche, that field which has been investigated least of all, is concealing the greatest scientific discovery of all.

The courage here shown, and the integrity expressed, are gratifying, but what can hardly come out, because the conflict is set as an issue of free intellectual or scientific inquiry, is the fact that even completely "free" science ought not to be expected to settle final questions concerning the nature of man. No crucial philosophical issue can ever have sure-thing settlement in terms that can later be used to compel consent. The idea that this is possible, or will some day become possible, is the basic flaw in the ideological way of life.