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MUSINGS ON THINKING

FOR answer to the question, "How do we think?" we go to a book that is not widely known, yet has been available for years. It is *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy,* by Leonard Nelson, first published by Yale University Press in 1949, and restored to print in this country in 1965 by Dover Publications. Who was Leonard Nelson? He was a German philosopher (1882-1927) who called himself "a faithful disciple of Socrates and of his great successor Plato." He taught for years at the University of Gottingen and later founded an academy near Cassel "for the education of responsible political leaders." Speaking of this academy in his Foreword to Nelson's book, Brand Blanshard of Yale remarks: "Not unnaturally it fell under the ban of Hitler and had to be transferred to Denmark and later to England." Blanshard also says:

> Though he did not live into the Hitler regime (he died at forty-five), 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's fundamental conviction—sometimes called a "heresy"—was that philosophical truth exists and is attainable by the use of reason. "This conviction," says Julius Kraft in his Introduction, "inspiring his whole life, was squarely opposed to the spirit of his time, which, for the first one or two decades of the century, was characterized by skepticism, and then turned more and more in the direction of mysticism, developments that were climaxed by the imposition on the German people of National Socialism as the obligatory world-view—just five years after Nelson's premature death."

Speaking of Socrates and his pedagogic task, Nelson says in his first chapter or lecture, "The Socratic Method":

> 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 counterquestion, 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.
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> But only the first. For it does not take the pupil beyond the abandonment of his prejudices, the realization of his not knowing, this negative determinant of all genuine and certain knowledge.
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> Socrates, after this higher level of ignorance is reached, far from directing the discussion toward the metaphysical problems, blocks every attempt of his pupils to push straight on to them with the injunction that they had better first learn about the life of the weavers, the blacksmiths, the carters. In this pattern of the discussion we recognize the philosophical instinct for the only correct method: first to derive the general premises from the observed facts of everyday life, and thus to proceed from judgments of which we are sure to those that are less sure. . . .
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> 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.

How does the student become able to do his own thinking? He can do this only by tracking to the origin *all* the thoughts he has. To understand this we need illustrations. The Socratic maxims, "Know thyself," and "The unexamined life is not worth living," ring true, but it will help a great deal to see them in action. For this help we go to a slender book published in 1928 (Kahoe & Co., Yellow Springs, Ohio, and now available at $2.00 from Community Service Books, 14 E. Whiteman St., P.O. Box 243, Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387). The book is *Finding His World,* the story of the early life of Arthur E. Morgan, put together from extracts from his diaries at the turn of the century in the twenties by his wife, Lucy Griscom Morgan.

Arthur Morgan was born in a small town in Minnesota (St. Cloud), of a surveyor father (freethinking) and an orthodox fundamentalist mother. He was not very healthy and left home at nineteen to wander around the country and to get well or die in the attempt. He succeeded in getting well and lived to be ninety-five. Toward the end of this book he told how, as a youth, he graduated from the ideas of his upbringing, showing why this was far from easy.

> In my home I saw my liberal father in his slackness, apparent laziness, and failure to provide; and my orthodox mother, setting her teeth and straining to the utmost to make ends meet on almost nothing, yet forever helping those in still greater distress.
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> My orthodox friends constantly drew my attention to these facts with the observation, "By their fruits ye shall know them." For a boy determined to work his way through to a satisfactory philosophy, and yet equally determined not to give up any values in his existing environment, such experiences were not easily interpreted.
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> Only gradually, and largely as a result of my discovery that the great minds and spirits of the race were men who dared think freely, I worked my way to the conclusion that my own personal experiences were accidental rather than representative, and that the association of narrow orthodoxy with sound ethical standards was an historical accident, rather than a necessary relationship. That was no easy generalization to make in the face of the objective evidence.
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> By the time I was fifteen I decided to commit myself to free intellectual inquiry, but repeatedly in the years immediately following I reviewed my orthodox associations, partly because my early indoctrination was difficult to throw off, and partly to assure myself that I was not losing any values those associations offered. To paraphrase an expression of David Starr Jordan, I was led into the camp of the religious liberals about as gracefully and willingly as a cat is led across the carpet by the tail. The intellectual stultification of orthodox Christianity compelled the transition. So far has that transition gone that my wife accuses me of *claustrophobia*—a hatred of walls. . . . I believe it is very rare for a person ever to free himself entirely from illogical childhood commitments, and that in an intellectual world in which false barriers and superstitious commitments are everywhere perpetuated, *claustrophobia* is an almost necessary element of one's mental equipment.
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> The past has values for us. Through tradition and other forms of social inheritance we receive all the resources that lift us above primitive savagery, and also we receive from the dead and obsolete past all that encumbers us. We cannot arbitrarily accept or reject that inheritance as a whole. The problem of life is to weigh, appraise, select, and discard with equal care so that no values are lost and no impediments are retained.

To determine what sort of man was made by this sort of thinking, one might read his best book, *The Long Road,* also available from Community Service Books at the ridiculously low price of $2.50. We might add in conclusion that he became the nation's leading flood control engineer.

It is time to consider a very different sort of thinking—the thinking that led to the extraordinary works of William Blake. The best brief appreciation of Blake that we know of is Harold C. Goddard's essay, *Blake's Fourfold*

Vision, which is available as a pamphlet from Pendle Hill Publications, Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19065. This essay was given as a lecture at Swarthmore College in 1935 and was published by Pendle Hill in 1956. Close to the beginning Goddard says:

> The right way to approach any writer is in his own spirit. "Enthusiastic Admiration," says Blake, "is the first Principle of Knowledge and its last." So I shall not get to Blake's faults, which were many, but shall begin, in place of biography, with four moments in his life. (By the way, if any of you need reminding, he was born in 1757 and died in 1827.) Blake was a great believer in moments. All great events, he says, start in the pulsation of an artery. "There is a Moment in each Day," he tells us, "that Satan cannot find." One day when he was about eight or nine years old he encountered such a moment. He came home and told his parents that he had seen a tree full of angels. His father was about to give him a thrashing for lying when his mother interceded and saved him. That is one of the earliest glimpses we have of him. One of the last is in the words of a woman neighbor who was by his bedside when he expired. She went home and declared, "I have been at the death, not of a man, but of a blessed angel."
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> "A tree full of angels." "A blessed angel." What Blake saw as a child, he became as a man. *He became what he saw.* We all do, he held. He became it not immediately, and did not without many an unangelic moment on the way, but in the end. "He whose face gives no light, shall never become a star," is one of his fine sayings. His face did give light. And though it has taken a century, Blake is now recognized as a star of the first magnitude. The world is full of plans and programs and proposals for progress, for something better, but what we need, to strengthen our faith, is an actual sample of something better. "No longer talk at all about the kind of man that a good man ought to be," says Marcus Aurelius, "but be that man." "Where are the great and wise men," asks Jung, "who do not merely talk about the meaning of life and of the world, but really possess it?" Blake was one of those rare men. Obscure, almost unrecognized, often close to poverty, he went quietly ahead consecrating himself wholly to his work as poet and creative designer and engraver, upheld by the faith that he was speaking "to future generations by a Sublime Allegory."

Two other "moments" in Blake's life gain Goddard's attention. As the poet sat at the bedside of his dying brother, Robert, "he distinctly saw his brother's soul rise from his body just as the end came, clap his hands for joy, and ascend." Does it help our understanding to say to ourselves, "Well, yes, Blake was clairvoyant"? He saw what most of the rest of us cannot see. But *what* did he see? Is there an inner body or form that does not die when the physical body dies? If we agree that something of this sort was taking place, and the poet saw it, then how shall we rationalize and give discipline to such an order of seeing? Can we suppose ourselves able to *think* about such matters at all? The claim by hard-headed minds that such experiences are merely hallucinations is at least understandable if not necessarily acceptable. But then, on the other hand, what if Blake, and a very few others, are pioneers in an evolution to another kind of sight—a sight which may manifest at crucial intervals, just as, sometimes, heroic courage is born in otherwise ordinary individuals who then take extraordinary risks to save the lives of others? This, too, is a way of thinking, but except for those whose life is mainly in their power of imagination it is thinking which brings with it no recognizable avenues leading to confirmation. We can say only that Blake was a man for whom such thinking was not only possible but natural. Shall we say simply that he could see more than we are able to see? Must we leave it at that?

> One day in Blake's forty-sixth year, while he was living at Felpham and enjoying under William Hayley the patronage that promised him his first steady work and rescue from financial worry, he came home and found a drunken soldier in his garden. The soldier refused to budge, whereupon Blake (who was a small man) took him by the elbows and marched him out of the garden and fifty yards down the road The soldier retaliated by trumping up charges of sedition against Blake and having him arrested. He was acquitted, but the incident symbolizes a turning point in his life.
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> Why should so pacific a man have resorted to such violent action on such slight provocation? Blake, with all his wisdom, couldn't have told at the time. But looking back we can see. For the past several months he had been weighing a supreme

decision. Should he go on taking orders and doing hack work for Hayley and have plenty to live on, or should he go back to London, to poverty and freedom? Now a garden is always and everywhere an emblem of creation, and a soldier is an emblem of authority. It was not a drunken soldier, it was William Hayley in symbolic form whom Blake, without knowing it, ejected from his garden and pushed down the road. Soon after, he left his patron and returned to London, fulfilling words he had spoken of Hayley a few months before: "He thinks to turn me into a portrait Painter as he did poor Romney, but this he nor all the devils in hell will never do." And so this little drama of the dragoon becomes as parabolic as Christ's driving the money-changers from the Temple. Keats is right: the life of a great man is a continual allegory.

When he was dying Blake said to his wife that he had no grief but in leaving her. A little later he changed this view.

Shortly before his death he broke out singing. Then he said to his wife that he had been wrong: he was not leaving her, he would always be near to care for her. After that he was still. He died so quietly that the exact moment could hardly be determined. Notice: he spoke words of love and unconscious poetry, he drew, he sang, he showed faith, he was silent. "I am certain of nothing," said Keats, "but of the holiness of the Heart's affections, and the truth of Imagination." Blake's last hours centered around those two certainties.

And this is the man they called insane—or at least a bit mad. No. A madman doesn't make the simple-hearted industrious worker Blake was. A better way to put it is to say that Blake had the assets of insanity without its liabilities. And that isn't insanity. It is genius.

How does Blake think? He thinks toward a reconciliation of opposites. Goddard says:

In Milton Satan is a divine criminal who is flung out of Heaven for his pride, establishes a kingdom of evil and tempts Eve, and through her Adam, to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But in the Greek myth, Prometheus is a sort of divine Robin Hood who steals fire from Heaven and at the price of being crucified by Zeus bestows the gift of the gods on suffering humanity. Plainly these are opposite versions of the same story. It is the greatness of Blake that he accepts both and reconciles them. "Heaven, Earth and Hell henceforth shall live in harmony." Indeed, the moment we translate them into living biological and psychological terms we see they are both true, and that either alone is false.

There is a Blakean man in Goddard who at this point bursts into action. He holds, he says, a seed in his hand—the seed of a water-lily. "Now," he says, "imagine this seed *fallen* from the flower into the mud and cold and darkness at the bottom of a pond."

Why doesn't it decay like a bit of dead leaf, or go on lying there unchanged like a pebble? Because there is life within it, you say. Of course. But what would that life amount to, if beyond the dark world of mud in which it lies, beyond the world of water above that, beyond even the world of air above *that,* there were not, in an ethereal realm, *the sun,* whose rays somehow or other penetrate to the seed buried down there in the dark? Ah, then it is the sun that starts it growing. But the sun does not start the pebble growing. Plainly it is *both*—not an action but an interaction—something within the seed and at the same time something millions of miles above the seed. Is there a tiny invisible sun inside the seed with a strange affinity between it and the great sun? Or does the seed somehow retain a memory that it was once a water-lily, which the sun awakens into what we can only call aspiration? Who can tell? All we know is that the seed germinates, as we say. Down, go the roots, up, up, up climbs the stem through the dark cold water until, as it nears the surface, it feels within itself (I omit the leaves to abbreviate) a bursting bulb-like something of white and gold. And then it puts its head into a new element and one glorious morning it opens in a veritable sunburst of purity and fragrance and realizes (with a gasp of astonishment, I can't help believing) that the world which it thought was just within itself is an actual one, out there, around, beyond, above.

But now suppose our seed in the mud at the bottom of the pond had been an eighteenth-century rationalist seed unwilling to act without complete logical demonstration, or a nineteenth-century seed with belief solely in the facts of its material environment. What would have happened? There would have been no water-lily.

Let us make Plato and Blake our instructors, and think as bravely and as cautiously as we can.

REVIEW
WHAT DO WE KNOW?

A READER in northern California recently sent us some pages torn from a paper called *San Francisco Focus* (for last June) which included an article by Theodore Roszak on the sixties. This was a time of youthful insurgency, of a great deal of posturing and self-righteous revolt. Roszak, while noting this, goes on to point out that whatever the excesses, and for many youngsters, the disasters of the sixties, those years also projected "images of a freedom, naturalness, moral indignation and public candor that nobody can document as visible elements of the Eisenhower fifties, the Nixon-Carter seventies, the Reagan eighties." He goes on:

> Those who set about to trash the period for its self-indulgence, narcissism, childish insanity, etc., ought to be asked to specify a historical baseline for their reservations. What do they have in mind as a preferable comparison? When in living memory have we had more people in the streets, on the campuses, in the jails, in the daily news seeking to force upon the national conscience the hard questions of peace, justice, personal liberty, open government? When has the very idea that our society needs radical social alternatives found more insistent advocacy, especially among the middle-class beneficiaries of the system? When will we again find public debate fired by the passion for controversy we could once expect from the likes of C. Wright Mills, Paul Goodman, R. D. Laing, Michael Harrington, E. F. Schumacher, James Baldwin, Norman O. Brown, Alan Watts, Herbert Marcuse, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Kenneth Roxroth or the pre-born-again Eldridge Cleaver?

Roszak goes on to pursue a fruitful discussion of the sixties, but his characteristically perceptive remarks reminded us of one of his books—probably the largest—which we had not looked at in years. And taking up and reading again *Where the Wasteland Ends* (Doubleday, 1979), it seemed a big mistake to neglect such a book for so long. This is one of the books which should be regularly reread, and therefore re-reviewed. It is in a way a sustained cry of desperation at how we use our minds, or fail to use them. Yet this needs correction. There is a depth of understanding which reaches beyond the mind—when truly knowing something becomes unshakeably real, impossible to put on a shelf and ignore for a time. To get this across, Roszak goes to Tolstoy.

> There is a moment in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* when the dying Ivan wanders back in memory to an episode in his early education. He recalls a lesson in logic . . . the familiar textbook syllogism that begins "All men are mortal."
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> "All men are mortal" . . . he knew it then, as a boy: an indisputable fact. And here on his deathbed, he confronts the fact again. "All men are mortal." But now there is a special light that plays over the words, gravely changing their character. It is as if Ivan has for the first time come to know his mortality. And yet he has always known it, as a matter of simple deduction from the premise. He has always known it . . . but never known it, not as he knows it here and now. There is nothing he can add to the fact, he cannot increase its "information content." Nothing about the fact has changed. Ivan has at last learned what these four words really *mean.* He cannot say anything more or different than when he was a schoolboy in his logic class; yet what he knows now carries the weight of increased *meaning.* Ivan does not know more; he knows deeper.

This, you could say, is precisely the difference between an intellectual and a wise man. The intellectual has words for practically everything; the wise man knows what he knows through and through; what he knows he cannot forget, any more than he can stop breathing. How a wise man becomes wise might be illustrated by Gandhi, who, when he read something he felt to be true, made it part of his life, as he did after reading Ruskin's *Unto This Last.*

Roszak asks:

> But where is this increased meaning to be found? No longer in the words, but in the whole man who hears and speaks them. It is in *the feel of the words* as they pass through his mind and in the power they have acquired to change his life. The words are the same, but now when Ivan ponders them, there is a *resonance* that was not there before. The meaning is in the resonance. And the resonance swells within him until it rocks the foundations of his life.
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> There are ways of looking and ways of knowing. Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich is a study in existential knowledge, knowledge that possesses the resonance of personal crisis. The knowledge of transcendent symbols has much the same character. It too must have its resonance: the resonance of root meaning. In both cases, we are carried beyond verbal surfaces. In both cases, knowledge is

deepened and personalized by the impact of personal experience, but without increase of information. So we are left knowing more than we can say—unless perhaps we have the gift of rhapsodic declaration. We are in the position of the Zen master who began as a novice knowing that mountains are only mountains, rivers only rivers, and finished as a sage knowing that mountains are only mountains, rivers, only rivers . . . ah, but finished knowing it *wisely.* How to talk about such things?

Words, it becomes evident, are both bearers of meaning and barriers to meaning. They are bearers of meaning when they have resonance, when they bear octaves and chords as well as linear form. Yet the scientifically trained mind, taught to rely on precise definition, finds itself confused by resonant prose: How can you build a bridge from instructions that have multiple meanings? But there are levels of mind which become famished for resonance, hungers that thrive on ambiguity. Roszak writes:

> The peculiar degeneration of consciousness from which we suffer—the diminishing awareness of symbolic resonance—is especially a crisis of language. In our culture, almost uniquely, we have inverted the hierarchical relation between rhapsodic declaration and literal prose, between matters of myths and matters of fact. Rhapsody and myth—the prime linguistic carriers of symbolic resonance—have long since ceased to be regarded as sources of knowledge. . . .
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> Think how fanatically verbal our education is, our *good* education that strives for "excellence" by force-feeding children with reading-writing-and-arithmetic from the earliest possible age, and never ceases exercising that narrow range of skills from nursery school to graduate school. Lecture, textbook, recitation, examination, note taking, research, criticism, debate, discussion . . . from Dick and Jane, to the seminar table and learned journal. If there is more to the human anatomy than the reading eye, the logical ear, and the articulating voice box, our schools know nothing of it. . . .
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> To live fully is to live resonantly. Language isolated from its non-verbal resonance can adequately express only the monotones of life: simple information, unambiguous operations. Yet the major effect of analytical and positivist philosophy over the past several generations has not been to amplify resonance, but to imperiously drive all meaning into just such monotonous linguistic formulations . . . and then to shoot on sight whatever refuses to be herded, into this intellectual concentration camp. As if language has become the private property of logicians, technicians, and scientists, and henceforth all communication must be molded on the hard-edged exactitudes of laboratory research—without even allowance for the contribution that intuition, hunches, wordplay, metaphor, and rule-of-thumb make to all worthwhile research.

In passing it seems appropriate to insert here a passage by A.H. Maslow in *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* which applies directly to what Roszak has said:

> The picture of the scientist must change, and is giving way to an understanding of the creative scientist, and the creative scientist lives by peak experiences. He lives for the moments of glory when a problem solves itself, when suddenly through a microscope he sees things in a very different way, the moments of revelation, of illumination, insight, understanding, ecstasy. These are vital for him. Scientists are very, very shy and embarrassed about this. They refuse to talk about this in public. It takes a very, very delicate kind of a midwifery to get these things out, but I have gotten them out. They are there; and if one can manage to convince a creative scientist that he is not going to be laughed at for these things, then he will blushingly admit the fact of having a high emotional experience from, for example, the moment in which the crucial correlation turns out right. They just don't talk about it, and as for the usual textbook on how you do science, it is total nonsense.

We shall conclude our refreshing return to *Where the Wasteland Ends* with a quotation from a passage on the promise of ecology.

> Ecology stands at a critical crossroads. Is it, too, to become another anthropocentric technique of efficient manipulation, a matter of enlightened self-interest and expert, long-range budgeting? Or will it meet the nature mystics on their own terms and so recognize that we are to embrace nature as if indeed it were a beloved person in whom, as in ourselves something sacred dwells? . . .
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> Ecology already hovers on the threshold of heresy. Will it be brave enough to step across and, in so doing, revolutionize the sciences as a whole? If that step is to be taken, it will not be a matter of further research, but of transformed consciousness. Kathleen Raine, in a single line of poetry, gives us the razor's edge of the issue neatly honed: "It is not birds that speak, but men learn silence."

COMMENTARY
THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

THIS week's lead article raises several questions about the process of "thinking" and gives a little light on some of them, but there are many more questions. What, for example, drove Leonard Nelson (see page one) to devote his life to teaching his students to cut "through the roots of their dogmatism"? And why, at the age of fifteen, did Arthur Morgan resolve to examine all the indoctrination to which he had been subjected up to that time, and to throw off its influence? What, again, inspired men like Copernicus and a handful of other men to call into question the widely accepted Ptolemaic view of how the universe was organized, and work all their lives to establish the realities on which the Copernican revolution was based?

In his book, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* (Norton, 1969), Ortega y Gasset writes illuminatingly on this subject by distinguishing between what he calls ordinary students and the rare individuals who insist upon questioning everything they are taught. He says:

> It is enough to compare the approach of a man who is going to study an already-existing science with the approach of a man who feels a real, sincere, and genuine need for it. The former will tend not to question the content of the science, not to criticize it; on the contrary, he will tend to comfort himself by thinking that the content of the science which already exists has a defined value, is pure truth. What he seeks is simply to assimilate it as it already is. On the other hand, the man who is needful of a science, he who feels the profound necessity of truth, will approach this ready-made knowledge with caution, full of suspicion and prejudice, submitting it to criticism, even assuming in advance that what the book says is not true. In short, for the very reason that he needs, with deep anguish, to know, he will think that this knowledge does not exist, and he will manage to unmake what is presented as already made. It is men like this who are constantly correcting, renewing, recreating science.

For a great many readers, this idea is deeply disturbing since it challenges their sense of security in what is regarded as established knowledge of the world. Yet for the creative spirit it is an invitation to discovery, for a lifetime's work.

Where, then, does progress lie? It does not lie in the accumulation of facts and theories, but in the minds of intelligent human beings. The accumulated assumptions about the world, in a given period of history, are all, sooner or later, going to be changed. Our commonplace conceits based on the "knowledge" of our time will all be more or less destroyed and replaced by other ideas, and these, too, are fated eventually to be replaced by still other ideas which will be closer to "reality," but only closer and not reality itself. Meanwhile, the world in general is subject to illusion after illusion. Again, Ortega writes:

> Meanwhile, generation after generation, the frightening mass of human knowledge which the student must assimilate piles up. And in proportion, as knowledge grows, is enriched, and becomes specialized, the student will move farther and farther away from feeling any immediate and genuine need for it. Each time, there will be less congruence between the sad human activity which is studying, and the admirable human occupation which is true knowing. And so the terrible gap which began at least a century ago continues to grow, the gap between living culture, genuine knowledge, and the ordinary man. Since culture or knowledge has no other reality than to respond to needs that are truly felt and to satisfy them in one way or another, while the way of transmitting knowledge is to study, which is not to feel those needs, what we have is that culture or knowledge hangs in mid-air and has no roots of sincerity in the average man who finds himself forced to swallow it whole. That is to say, there is introduced into the human mind a set of dead ideas that could not be assimilated.

This takes us back to Plato's accurate account of the human condition. The only real difference between what Plato says and several modern analysts and critics is that Plato, while wholly realistic, does not give way to despair, but points to the example of Socrates and the kind of thinking that one must learn to do in order to find his way out of the cave of ignorance.

Yet the discovery that the modern world, as in other periods of history, is enwrapped in illusion, may come as a painful and discouraging surprise. But this, after all, is no more than getting closer to understanding the actual human condition. This is the fundamental meaning of the allegory of the Cave, getting us ready to see with better eyes than we have been using in the past.

How is it that Plato saw so much more clearly than we do? This is doubtless the most important question that we can ask. It is equivalent to asking what is knowledge and how it is to be obtained. Has anyone ever answered this question? The answer must be both yes and no. We know that there is *some* knowledge in the world, yet how much of it is real knowledge depends upon us rather than anyone else. There are, then, no outside authorities; yet, on the other hand, there are those who can give help. Choosing who they are is a crucial decision.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THE QUALITY OF JANE

IN the late 1950s John Holt was teaching (for four years) in the Colorado Rocky Mountain School. In *How Children Fail* (1964) he tells about an experience there:

> A few days ago Nell came up to the desk and looking at me steadily and without speaking, as usual, put on the desk her ink copy of the latest composition. Our rule is that on the ink copy there must be no more than three mistakes per page, or the page must be copied again. I checked her paper, and on the first page found five mistakes. I showed them to her, and urged her to be more careful—typical teacher's advice. She looked at me, heaved a sigh, and went back to her desk. She is left-handed, and doesn't manage a pen very well. I could see her frowning with concentration as she worked and struggled. Back she came after a while with the second copy. This time the page had seven mistakes, and the handwriting was noticeably worse. I told her to copy it again. Another bigger sigh, and she went back to her desk. In time the third copy arrived, looking much worse than the second, and with even more mistakes.
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> At that point Bill Hull asked me a question, one I should have asked myself, one we ought all to keep asking ourselves: "Where are you trying to get, and are you getting there?"
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> The question sticks like a burr. In schools—but where isn't it so?—we so easily fall into the same trap: the means to an end becomes an end in itself. I had on my hands this three-mistake rule meant to serve the end of careful work and neat compositions. By applying it rigidly was I getting more careful work and neater compositions? No, I was getting a child who was so worried about having to recopy her paper that she could not concentrate on doing it, and hence did worse and worse, and would probably do the next papers badly as well.

Holt was right, of course. The rule worked backwards for Nell. He should have abandoned the rule for Nell and found some other way to help her. But then, rules which are ignored lose whatever power they have. You can't say that a school should not make rules. Or you say that only schools with really exceptional teachers can operate without rules. But then you must admit that such schools are very rare, perhaps non-existent. Holt muses:

> We need to ask more often of everything we do in school "Where are we trying to get, and is this thing we are doing helping us to get there?" Do we do something because we want to help the children and can see that what we are doing is helping them? Or do we do it because it is inexpensive or convenient for school, teachers, administrators? Or because everyone else does it? We must beware of making a virtue of necessity, and cooking up high-sounding educational reasons for doing what is done for reasons of administrative economy or convenience. The still greater danger is that, having started to do something for good enough reasons, we may go on doing it stubbornly and blindly, as I did that day, unable or unwilling to see that we are doing more harm than good.

Yet Holt had precedent for doing something that accomplished more harm than good: the other teachers, Bill Hull excepted, were enforcing the rule. Does this mean that we ought to regard common practices with skepticism and perhaps with resistance? The answer has to be: It depends. If you are learning a trade, say, Carpentry, it is probably folly to resist the common practices of good carpenters. They have learned what they know and do from personal experience, starting with the counsels of older craftsmen. Their rules are really not institutional rules but rules that have proved themselves in practice by individuals. They are part of the wisdom of the craft, different in origin from the rules formulated by institutions. You can trust the rule of a craftsman, whereas, the rules made by an institution, say a school, may have nothing to do with the needs of good teaching, or the connection is so remote that it is hardly worth noticing. Holt's rules—he does have a few—are in no way institutional. They are based on his personal experience in teaching. This is what makes his books so good. They come from what he has found out about how children learn, the subject to which he devoted his life.

Here is another extract from *How Children Fail:*

> Today Jane did one of those things that, for all of her rebellious and annoying behavior in class, make her one of the best and most appealing people, young or old, that I have ever known. I was at the board trying to explain to her a point on long division, when she said, in self-defense, "But Miss W. (her fourth-grade teacher) told us that we should take the first number . . ." Here she saw the smallest shadow of doubt on my face. She knew instantly that I did not approve of this rule, and without so much as a pause she continued, ". . . it wasn't Miss W., it was someone else . . " and then went on talking about long division.
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> I was touched and very moved. How many adults would have seen what she saw, that what she was saying about Miss W.'s teaching was, in some slight degree, lowering my estimate of Miss W.? Even more to the point, how many adults, given this opportunity to shift the blame for their difficulties onto the absent Miss W., would instead have instantly changed their story to protect her from blame? For all our yammering about loyalty, not one adult in a thousand would have shown the loyalty that this little girl gave to her friend and former teacher. And she scarcely had to think to do it; for her, to defend one's friends from harm, blame, or even criticism was an instinct as natural as breathing.

Holt adds this comment:

> Teachers and schools tend to mistake good behavior for good character. What they prize above all is docility, suggestibility; the child who will do what he is told; or even better, the child who will do what is wanted without even having to be told. They value most in children what children least value in themselves. Small wonder that their effort to build character is such a failure; they don't know it when they see it. Jane is a good example. She has been a trial to everyone who has taught her. Even this fairly lenient school finds her barely tolerable; most schools long since would have kicked her out in disgrace. Of the many adults who have known her, probably very few have recognized her extraordinary qualities or appreciated their worth. Asked for an estimate of her character, most of them would probably say that it was bad. Yet, troublesome as she is, I wish that there were more children like her.

A little later he goes on about Jane:

> The more I see of our troublemaking Jane, and the more I think about her, the clearer it becomes that she has a great need to feel truly loved, but feels that being loved when she is nice, good, obedient, etc., does not count. Loved is a tricky word here; perhaps I should say admired, appreciated, or even honored and respected. She is like Cyrano; she thinks that nothing could be more contemptible than to try to get approval and affection from others by saying, doing, and being what they want.
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> Isn't there much to admire in this? Perhaps someday she will feel that she can oblige and help the people she likes without having to worry about whether she gets anything out of it for herself. Right now, she finds it hard to show her natural affection, as other children might, just by being affectionate. On the contrary, she feels she must continually test, by misbehaving, the affection of others for her. Now and then she miscalculates, and draws down on herself punishment that she thinks is too severe, and so falls into a cycle of angry rebellion that she does not know how to break.
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> She is at my lunch table these days, and is delightful company; she's even making vague gestures in the direction of better table manners. I wish I could persuade her that she need not every day give our affection for her the acid test, but I guess only time will do that. At lunch the other day she said to me, "I hate teachers!" and then gave me a 1/100th-of-a-second smile and a hard sock on the arm. How much easier her life would be if we did not continually oblige her to choose between our adult approval and her own self-respect.

You seldom come across reading about children with the understanding Holt has.

FRONTIERS

The Horrors of Urbanization

A READING of the recent Worldwatch Paper No. *77, The Future of Urbanization: Facing the Ecological and Economic Constraints,* by Lester Brown and Jodi Jacobson, raises questions for which there are no apparent answers. For example, why do human beings, over the years, create problems which they hardly know how to solve, did not anticipate, and which create pain for large numbers of people, and eventually for everybody?

We learn from this pamphlet:

> Cities of more than 5 million can now be found on every continent. Urban projections for the year 2000 indicate that three out of the five cities with populations of 15 million or more will be in the Third World—Mexico, Sao Paulo, and Calcutta. Asia will contain 15 of the world's 35 largest cities. In Africa, only Cairo is now in the 5 million category, but by the end of the century, the continent is projected to have at least eight such centers.

What is the result of this sudden urban growth?

> Population growth in the Third World cities is outpacing city and national budgets and straining urban institutions. The result is a profusion of sprawling, unplanned cities in which access to adequate housing, transportation, water supplies, and education is severely limited. This pattern of uncontrolled growth reduces urban productivity and efficiency, affecting not only urban areas but entire national economies.
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> The sharp income stratifications characteristic of Third World urban populations result in part from too many people chasing too few jobs. In metropolitan Manila, 16 per cent of the labor force is unemployed and 43 per cent is underemployed. The government's own program for economic development, including an industrial policy which emphasizes capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive industries, has shut many out of the job market.
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> Constant increases in urban populations also tax city services to the limit. In Alexandria, Egypt, a sewage system built earlier in this century for I million people now serves 4 million. Lack of investment capital to upgrade waste treatment and drainage systems has left parts of the city awash in raw sewage. Most people in large African cities—Lagos, Nairobi, Kinshasa, Addis Ababa, and Lusaka, among others—lack piped water and sanitation. A 1979 survey found that 75 per cent of families in Lagos lived in single-room dwellings. Seventy-eight per cent of the households shared kitchen facilities with another family, while only 13 per cent had running water. If the urban growth forecast for Africa is realized, living standards will undoubtedly deteriorate further.
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> Low incomes, high land costs, and a dearth of affordable financing leave a growing number of families unable to buy or rent homes—even ones subsidized by the government. In Lima and La Paz, the tin-and-tar-paper shacks of the urban poor are found in the shadow of tall, modern office buildings. Mexico City has gained notoriety for the large number of people living in make-shift burrows in a hillside garbage dump. Scenes like these are repeated in shantytowns and illegal settlements ringing cities throughout the Third World.

Fossil fuels are largely responsible for the growth and multiplication of cities. Oil made massive urbanization possible. Today, with the increase in the cost of oil, the cost of urban living is greatly increased, but with few prospects of any relief. The fundamental solution is a sensible balance between rural and urban enterprise, with a corresponding balance in the distribution of population. There are a few examples of countries in which this balance has been achieved, mostly in Asia. The authors of this pamphlet say:

> The optimal balance between countryside and city varies, of course, from country to country and within a country over time. For example, the optimum size of cities will be reduced as the age of oil slowly fades and the age of renewal of energy begins to unfold. Oil is a concentrated resource, easily transported in the huge quantities that large cities require. In contrast, renewable energy resources, whether firewood, solar collectors, or small-scale hydro, are more geographically diffuse. Both the ecology and the economies of these energy sources suggest that the future will favor smaller cities and those who live in rural areas. . . . The growth in the world's urban population from 600 million in 1950 to 2 billion in 1986 is without

> precedent. Because urban expansion in the more advanced industrial societies has come to a virtual halt over the last decade or so, urbanization is now concentrated in the Third World. Part of this urban growth is a response to the needs of industrialization, the pull of urban job opportunities. But much of the urban growth now occurring in the Third World is the result of failed economic and population policies, a process driven more by rural poverty than urban prosperity. Such policies have needlessly distorted the development process in many developing countries. . . . Mounting external debts, rising unemployment, and proliferating squatter settlements are among the more visible manifestations of urban-biased development strategies. These effects are nowhere more evident than in Africa, where both per capita grain production and income have been falling for many years.

The importance of balance between urban and rural areas is made plain by a few countries:

> As China worked toward national self-sufficiency in cereals, some of its major cities have been seeking self-sufficiency in the production of perishables, particularly fresh vegetables. To reach this goal, Shanghai, a city of 11 million, extended its boundaries into the surrounding countryside, increasing the city area to some 6,000 square kilometers. This shift of nearby land to city management greatly facilitates the recycling of nutrients in human wastes. As of 1986, Shanghai, was self-sufficient in vegetables and produced most of its grain and a good part of its pork and poultry. Vegetables consumed in Shanghai and many other Chinese cities typically travel less than 10 kilometers from the fields in which they are produced, often reaching the market within hours of being harvested. . . . As a result of the government's strong support for agriculture, incomes of many rural Chinese are higher than those of their urban counterparts. Few Third World governments emphasize agriculture as strongly as China does, however.

The final word of this pamphlet is that if more enlightened development strategies are advocated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the results may be help to all the people and "not merely the urban elite." Bitter experience seems the only effective instructor of human beings. Some day it may be widely recognized that the welfare of the planet includes the welfare of man.