

PLATO'S INTENT AND METHOD

A READER wonders why we quote so often from Plato and Aristotle. Didn't Alfred Korzybski and General Semantics take us far beyond these old Greek thinkers, and beyond any sort of "philosophy," too?

The first requirement in reply to this question is to distinguish between Plato and Aristotle. Plato was Aristotle's teacher, but Aristotle departed from his teacher's conceptions in a fundamental respect. Plato maintained that the foundation of all important knowing is ethical, that the individual's harmony with the best he knows is the necessary starting-point in the pursuit of truth. A man at odds with himself lacks the symmetry of a moral life, and this warps his judgment. All the lesser disciplines obtain their integrity from this moral harmony, since the use to which they are put, the causes they are made to serve, will depend upon the individual's ethical outlook. Plato was convinced that there is a divine spark in all humans, that the highest use of the mind is for the purpose of fanning that spark into the flame of self-knowledge. He called this exercise of conscious intelligence the Dialectic and he illustrated it in the Socratic dialogues.

Aristotle substituted his logic for the Dialectic—which is more art and invitation than syllogistic analysis—and he sought his first principles through empirical research. He could not accept the idea of innate or *a priori* knowledge, which supplies direction but needs to be awakened, elucidated, examined, and subjected to tests. Aristotle said that while the mind contributes the forms of knowledge, its content comes only from sense perception. You gather evidence, generalize it with the mind, then apply logic to the generalizations to produce the conclusions, which are knowledge. This is science, of which "philosophy" has become a subordinate part. There is no inner guide, no

questing, conative intelligence striving to cope with the bewildering spectacle of the world, to extricate itself from the drives of appetite, the limiting hungers of emotion. There is only the logic machine plus its raw material obtained through the senses. In combination these two produce truths which compel assent. Morality plays no part. This is the "public truth" of science. You formulate the assumptions based on observation, develop their implications with reason, check the logic, and accept the conclusion because you must.

Plato, on the other hand, was convinced that the truths which compel admission in this way are always lesser truths. The important, crucial truth requires voluntary, inner assent. This is not, of course, a uniquely Platonic idea. An old Persian text put it in other words: "Truth is of two kinds—one manifest and self-evident; the other demanding incessantly new demonstrations and proofs." Milton Mayer speaks of "the epistemological commonplace that descriptive knowledge accumulates and normative knowledge does not." Descriptive knowledge tells us what the world is like, while normative knowledge tells what we ought to do. Normative knowledge looks into motive. Plato faced the problem—the prior problem, he declared—of seeking normative knowledge, while Aristotle evaded it, placing all emphasis on the increase of public truth. He evaded it, that is, as a *pedagogic* question, despite the fact that he wrote much on ethics.

An understanding of the intellectual and cultural setting in which Alfred Korzybski began his reform in the use of language would require a review of the cumulative influence of Aristotle and his intellectual heirs and descendants, such as Bacon, Descartes, Hume, and Locke, since these are the men who shaped the Western mind and provided science and technology with its major

assumptions. Korzybski set out to correct what seemed to him the dire effects of the Aristotelian logic, hoping thereby to eliminate the intellectual rigidities which everywhere prevailed. The Aristotelian tools of description had made apparent certainties of matters which are actually in constant flux, requiring a corresponding flexibility in any account of them. Korzybski provided certain rules (words are not things, a map is not the territory, the man or situation of today is not the same as the man or situation of last year) which, he believed, "would gradually liberate the individual from his Aristotelian orientations and make a modern man of him—a non-Aristotelian," as S. I. Hayakawa puts it. Korzybski did not challenge the fundamental assumptions of scientific inquiry; he simply wanted to cleanse modern thought of Aristotelian contaminations. The far-reaching influence of this reform is evident from books like Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action* and from regular reading of *Etc.*, the quarterly magazine published by the International Society for General Semantics.

In the first issue of this journal (1943) Korzybski wrote:

I hear that some readers like the title ETC. and that a few do not. Personally I feel that the publication of the Society could not have a better title. . . . In a non-aristotelian, infinite-valued orientation, we do not assume that what we say can cover all the characteristics of a situation, and so we remain conscious of a permanent *et cetera* instead of having the dogmatic, period-and-stop attitude.

This title, *Etc.*, with its justification by Korzybski, makes something of a link between the General Semantic criticism of the delusions arising from the misuse of language and Plato's broader warnings concerning the written word. Plato was not an advocate of finalities and flat-out demonstrations. The art of persuasion, for him, was a mysterious matter, involving inner awakening rather than proof. Although he sometimes seemed to, he would not "tell" people anything. He wanted them to tell themselves.

When, in the *Gorgias*, Callicles disparages philosophy, this is the reply of Socrates:

Philosophy always holds the same, and it is her speech that now surprises you, and she spoke it in your presence. So you must either refute her, as I said just now, by proving that wrong doing and impunity for wrong done is not the uttermost evil; or, if you leave that unproved, by the Dog, god of the Egyptians, there will be no agreement between you, Callicles and Callicles, but you will be in discord with him all your life. And yet I, my very good sir, should rather choose to have my lyre, or some chorus that I might provide for the public, out of tune and discordant, or to have any number of people disagreeing with me and contradicting me than that I should have internal discord and contradiction *in my own self*.

The Dialectic was intended to bring the inquirer to the threshold of such confrontations. It could do no more. It would help a man to discover how he was fooling himself; it was the art of removing obstacles, but not of disclosing truth, since truth is native, not an acquisition.

How does the Dialectic proceed? By the "living and breathing word." It is not a sure thing. It may not succeed. Even the most skillful dialectician may fail, since he will not manipulate, will not bludgeon, will not seduce. A final paragraph in Robert Cushman's *Therapeia* deals with the Platonic recognition that in the last analysis we all decide for ourselves:

To be sure, in the hands of a skillful pedagogue like Socrates, dialectic may contrive to revolutionize the ethos of many; but is its range wide enough and powerful enough to be an instrument of social salvation? Even in the case of individuals, there is no assurance that dialectic will secure the fruits of its intent. It remains altogether possible that Alcibiades, a type of the man forever hung over the void of indecision, and others can contrive a moderate compromise within themselves. Alcibiades no doubt did find a tolerable adjustment of the strife of purposes within him. If the more sensitive spirit of a Socrates found contradiction insufferable and resolved it by a decision in favor of the Good, his resoluteness was exceptional. Of this fact Plato was always impressed, and he also knew that society exacted of Socrates the ultimate price of integrity. The world, as Plato well knew, supplies suitable

incentives for those who prefer comfort to courage, and it is not impossible that men will always find a way to moderate and contain their strife of spirit and inner compunction about the Good, while they indefinitely postpone decision and pretend ignorance of its claims. For this eventuality Plato's *therapeia* has no ready antidote, nor is an infallible one likely to be found.

Why do we keep on quoting Plato in these pages? Because it seems evident that, after about three hundred years of trying to get along without the Platonic outlook, the world is now slowly moving back to this view. Increasingly it is recognized that scientific truth, which is descriptive, is not enough. Descriptive truth doesn't eventually spill over and become normative truth. It doesn't tell us what to do, but only how to do what we have already decided (often uncritically) would be good. It was Plato who first pointed out that technical truth is good only for the development of technique; that there is no over-all view in technical knowledge which regulates its use. Regulative knowledge is normative; it establishes relations with the Good, and for knowledge of the Good one must practice philosophy. Philosophy is search.

These are the general ideas which the modern world is vaguely reaching for; they amount to statement of the deepest intuitions of the age. That they were voiced some twenty-five hundred years ago by Plato is of salutary interest. While many others have expressed the same ideas, Plato seems to have put them in very clear language, and very completely. Those who go back to him and study him carefully, perhaps with the help of a book like Cushman's *Therapeia* (Chapel Hill, 1958), may be led to realize that here was a thinker who took into consideration most if not all of the things we are now beginning to discover about ourselves and the world. Plato knew the difficulties of communication and wrote about them at length. He took fully into account the affective or emotional side of human life. He valued above all freedom or the necessity of self-discovery for all human beings. He saw that there are various levels of awareness in human beings,

and that the generalizations—the truths—of one level cannot be stretched to include a higher level, even though there may be parallels it is useful to note.

Yet it is in no way remarkable that there have been a great many people, especially people about thirty or forty years ago—who thought that we were finished with Plato and with any form of transcendental philosophy. The Enlightenment conception of knowledge then reigned supreme. We were going to find out how everything worked, satisfy all needs and desires, and then there would be no more Evil. Science in the hands of good men would finally replace any need for either philosophy or religion.

Going at the matter from an entirely different angle: We've been looking through *Mother Earth News* lately, both the editorial pages and the ads, and realizing that here is a youthful, ardent, and ever stronger rejection of the theory of knowledge that was exclusively current about forty years ago. Such magazines now celebrate and instruct in various do-it-yourself activities on the land and in the home that were supposed to have been made primitive and out of date—like Plato—by science and technology. People are today seeking means which are consistent with internally discovered ends—ways of living which harmonize with intuitions about the sort of life that's worth living. The people who are doing these things—learning to raise their own food, build their own homes, balance their own diets, raise and teach their own children—didn't get their *direction* from scientific manuals. There may be some science in what they do, but their inspiration came from the kind of monitor that Plato has Socrates tell about and explain. They are seeking a harmony *with themselves*. They have no Socrates to help them, but they can't avoid dialectical interchange with the world and its increasingly damaged and mutilated surfaces. There are also damaged and mutilated human lives to be observed. These people—a great many of them—are gradually creating a new kind of science: science originated

in the light of human values. This seems a Platonic sort of science.

The Platonic philosophy is a philosophy for those who have decided that the best guide in life comes from consulting oneself. It is a philosophy concerned with the natural symmetries of existence as they appear to one determined to rely upon himself. Plato is basically suspicious of learned treatises on "morality." He is suspicious of the written word, somewhat as General Semanticists are suspicious of any statement about the nature of things which pretends to completeness. Nothing one says, as Korzybski pointed out, "can cover all the characteristics of a situation." In contrast, the dialectical exchange, while limited in its possibilities, is a reciprocal flow of ideas between thinking individuals, and there is much less chance of misunderstanding. Animated thought in conversation may strike sparks; misconceptions can be corrected; the participants can press one another to deeper search. In contrast, a book is dumb; it cannot answer back; its pretensions, when taken seriously, may lead to illusions of certainty.

Yet Plato wrote many books! But note that Plato elaborated no dogmas, founded no religion, and he explained that on ultimate questions he would write nothing at all. His books simulate the dialogue form and he claimed for them no more authority than a kind of "play." On the subject of "laws," he pointed out that the laws he proposed in the book of that name were "second best"—that the ideal rule would always be that of wisdom, which is above any laws that can be written down. The Platonic conceptions are always loosely suggestive, provocative rather than final. While Plato was sure that a divine knowledge exists—that the inspiration Socrates found in his *daemon* was authentic and godlike—he would not put that wisdom in the form of sentences to be learned and parroted. When it came to matters beyond the reach of reason and common sense, he turned to myth for an inspiration which preserves freedom. Myths cannot be taken literally. They speak to the

imagination, not to memory. It is difficult to find a better comment on Plato as writer than a passage in Paul Friedlander's *Plato: An Introduction*, in which he says:

The written word is rigid. Beyond its natural limits it cannot give an answer to the questioner or protect itself against attacks. Thus it contradicts the basic Socratic-Platonic principle: philosophy is possible only as an exchange between two people; It is an infinite conversation renewing itself constantly out of a personal question. For this reason genuine philosophical discourse must decide whom it is addressed to and whom not—a principle that must have determined Plato's teaching in contrast to Sophistic instruction. . . .

Human life a play, man a plaything—yet what ethical strength did the old Plato, who said this, expend upon this life and with what a sense of responsibility did he always look upon it as a task! Legislation a play—but is not the picture of the old man unforgettable, writing laws despite the failure of all his political aspirations, for the founding of yet another Utopia, this time called Crete? Literature, the new form of art, the whole set of dramatic philosophical dialogues a play—what aesthetic passion and seriousness went into this play for half a century. Thus we are perhaps not entirely untrue to his spirit if we interpret, in a preliminary way, the meaning of his written work according to the world of appearances, which, to be sure, is only a *copy* of the eternal forms, but a copy of *eternal forms*, though afflicted with all the limitations of transitory existence, yet to the eye which has learned to see pointing toward eternal being and toward what is beyond being.

There is one other consideration—a larger one, it may be, than those which we have been examining. This is that the modern world seems to be going through a sudden and far-reaching psychological transformation—a striving after religious truth that has few parallels in recent centuries in the Western world. Every sort of thinker is entering this field, many of them with little knowledge of the great philosophies and religions of the past. The example, therefore, of a truly disciplined mind which explores these areas—a mind which shuns easy belief, rejects unearned certainty, and refuses all compromises which neglect the importance of intellectual

integrity—should be of peculiar value in the present. Plato's conception of rigor applies to all the transcendental ideas which are now sweeping into the foreground of thought. Soul, spirit, mind as independent realities have a central part in Platonic thought. Reincarnation is the form of immortality Plato suggests.

It may also be noted that scholars have found underlying unities linking Platonic thought with the themes of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Upanishads*. In *The Message of Plato* (Methuen, 1920), for example, E. J. Urwick says:

My reason for noting the similarity is just this: in the Indian conception, the fusion of metaphysics with ethics and politics was as necessary and complete as was the interdependence of good living with the knowledge of the living source of good, and from this a double result followed. On the one hand, only the purified soul could ever *know* reality; on the other hand, only knowledge of Reality could make purity of soul unchangeable and personal or social goodness real. On the one hand, the equanimity of resolute self-control was a condition of the discovery of spiritual truth, on the other hand, the full vision of truth alone could make the soul for ever "lord of the senses and the self." Their philosophy, therefore, was always a rule of life as well as a philosophy; it was Yoga as well as Vidya, a path of preparation for knowledge as well as an account of the knowledge to be reached. And in this the Platonic Socrates undoubtedly resembled them, not in his theory only, but in his life. His quest, as revealed in the Platonic writings, may seem obscure and confused; but the character of the seeker, like his faith, stands out with absolute clearness and consistency; stands out, also, as at once the condition and the result of his quest. . .

I affirm very confidently that if anyone will make himself familiar with the old Indian wisdom-religion of the Vedas and the Upanishads: will shake himself free, for the moment, from the academic attitude and the limiting Western conception of philosophy, and will then read Plato's dialogues, he will hardly fail to realize that both are occupied with the selfsame search, inspired by the same faith, drawn upward by the same vision.

"Out of Plato," Emerson said, "come all things that are still written and debated among men of thought." And in Alfred North Whitehead's opinion all subsequent philosophy has

been but footnotes to Plato. If, then, there is value in knowing what one of the wisest and most intelligent of humans thought and said about matters of enduring importance, Plato and his successors in the Platonic tradition are thinkers deserving frequent attention.

REVIEW

REPORT ON CHINA

THERE are several reasons for reading *More Than Herbs and Acupuncture* (Norton, 1975, \$7.95) by E. Grey Dimond, M.D., all of them important. First, since nearly everyone is curious about acupuncture, the report of a well-known cardiologist's personal observations and considered judgments concerning this treatment is of obvious interest. The writer has deliberately refrained from practicing acupuncture himself, in the hope that he will be regarded as an impartial professional witness. Second, Dr. Dimond writes as an American citizen as well as a medical man. His book compares his preconceptions about China with the actual experience of visits there, and tells about the Chinese friends he made. He went to China with a lot of questions in mind, and came back with some answers. Not all his questions were answered, but he makes it plain that ideological differences need not be barriers to human understanding. From this point of view, the book shows how much a man with simple open-mindedness can learn about a very different culture. Finally, it is likely to leave the reader with the impression that the best way to learn about China is to do what Dr. Dimond did—go there and look at an area of specialized activity that you know something about. Don't go there to psychoanalyze or judge the Chinese, but let what may be found out about them be incidental to some other serious inquiry. Much initial bias may be eliminated in this way.

Paternity for this book must be assigned to Edgar Snow, who was much impressed in 1970 by China's new health care policy, developed after the Cultural Revolution of 1966. Dr. Dimond met Snow in 1965 at a conference devoted to international understanding. They kept in touch, and in 1971 Snow urged his medical friend to visit China, investigate acupuncture, and to tell the American public what he thinks about health care in China—including the "role of the barefoot doctor, of herbs, of massive public health

measures, of changes in medical education . . . all areas needing an accurate medical analysis." Dr. Dimond decided to go, and to bring with him another widely respected physician, Paul Dudley White. He also brought his wife, Mary Clark Dimond, daughter of Grenville Clark. After a briefing by Edgar Snow the two physicians and their wives went to China.

Edgar Snow benevolently haunts this book. Snow was the only American the Chinese trusted, and the only American journalist who had been able to maintain contact with Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai throughout the long years when there was virtually no communication between China and the United States. Of Snow, who died in 1972, Dr. Dimond says:

Snow was neither a Communist nor a Communist sympathizer. He was an extremely accurate reporter, who, by hard work and luck, had achieved a reporter's ultimate dream and had scooped the world with his original interviews with Mao and his documentary book, *Red Star Over China*, in 1939.

Parenthetically, anyone today wanting to understand the People's Republic of China should begin by reading Snow's *Red Star*. There is no other place to begin, in any language, including Chinese.

These were the thoughts and questions in Dr. Dimond's mind when he set out on his first visit to China:

Specifically, a remarkable race of man, the Chinese, is about to enter for the first time the full world scene. The largest race, the oldest culture, impressively organized, under a disciplined, cohesive system, is about to become an influence, a force—economically, militarily, and morally. And Western man has no antecedent experience to prepare him for this historical event.

Had a godless regime, with the elimination of the energetic guidance of the well-meaning Christian efforts of the United States, England, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Spain, in a brief twenty-two years cleaned up an entire collection of problems? Were the people happy? If so, how could this be?

A long-time scholar of Chinese history, John King Fairbank, defined the West's dilemma: "The Chinese Communist rise to power in 1949 called into question our own view of ourselves and our place in

the world process. Insofar as the missionary conversion and the general uplift of the Chinese people had expressed our conviction that we lead the march of human progress, our self-confidence was dealt a grievous blow. One-fourth of mankind in China spurned not only Christianity, but also the supremacy of law, the ideals of individualism, the multi-party election process, civil liberties, and the self-determination of peoples, indeed our entire political order and its concepts of freedom and security through due process. One consolation in this crisis, therefore, was to think that the new Chinese Communist dictatorship did not represent the interests of a large enough proportion of the Chinese people, that it maintained itself only by force and manipulation, that, in fact, it was too evil to last, and in any case must be opposed as a matter of principle and duty."

A change from this attitude is both implicit and explicit throughout Dr. Dimond's book. Here is a quarter of all humanity who seem to have accomplished extraordinary changes in no more than a quarter of a century. Looking back on his China experience in the last chapter, this eminent physician writes:

One means of trying to understand the scope of the social changes in China is to look at any one major segment which has been fundamental to the new Chinese order and study what has been done. One can look at the school system, the language, farming, or civil functions, such as marriage and burial. These factors have all indeed been altered. The communization of the farms is a well-known change. However, the renaissance of an entire people from abject misery to a level of pride and scrupulous conduct requires the attention of all other societies, far beyond the units of change, such as medicine, or farming, or industry.

Wryly, Dr. Dimond wonders:

Perhaps there is no useful lesson for Americans to learn from China. In all good faith, perhaps we in the United States must accept crime and poor personal behavior as the price tag for our fundamental principle—individual liberty. Perhaps it is better to maintain the remarkable range of options of our way of life and accept the tragedies as a small penalty. Perhaps this is the right answer. Perhaps the increase in crime is only because there are more of us? Perhaps the raw tide of drugs, odd sex, and pornography will recede? Perhaps the disenchanting

young will find, as they season, that the system is better than they thought and take up their duties as citizens?

He continues the comparison:

The People's Republic of China and the United States of America arrive at the latter part of the twentieth century with interesting dilemmas. The United States has devised a method of government, under a Constitution, which has permitted a stable transition of power, through wars and peace, for two hundred years. The degree of individual liberty, the right of personal expression, the freedom of conduct has been remarkable.

The People's Republic of China arrives at this point with an unproved method of controlling and transmitting power. No assurance is yet available for a stable transition. The individual citizen has essentially no personal latitude but must remain responsive to group and state. Right of personal movement, of vote, of job, of home, of immigration, has been taken from the individual.

On the other hand, the United States has not developed an effective code of morality and ethics. Crime, drugs, venereal disease, unemployment, racism, school dropouts, broken families, alienated children, alcoholism, graft, political conniving are almost all the highest of any country in the world. The United States has become an old-young country.

The People's Republic of China has been a continuous immense moral campaign, evidently successful in leading the individual into a spirit of patriotism and good citizenship and away from self-seeking. The political leaders have been Spartan, free of corruption (other than ceaseless manipulations for power at the very highest level). The family is intact, marriage stable, children thoughtful and respectful of parents. The Chinese youth is enthusiastic about his government and dedicated to serving the people. China has become a young-old country.

Well, we can't do much about this book except quote from it. The best recommendation of the writer is his readiness to say what he has said here. He provides the transparently candid report of what was seen and experienced by a man quite willing to admit his puzzlement and wonder. Perhaps this is a distinctively American strength.

This is Dr. Dimond's last paragraph:

We have stopped our wars in Asia. Our missionaries have come home. A new missionary the moralistic Maoist, is about to be heard. The next war will not be with bullets and guns but by the demonstration of the soundness of our respective political and ethical messages and our ability to compete in the international market. Perhaps there will be no losers. Perhaps we will all be wiser.

Perhaps, again, this sort of happy ending can come only when people stop competing and trying to convert one another.

In its own way, by its content and spirit, *More Than Herbs and Acupuncture* seems an epoch-making book.

While Dr. Dimond lays stress on the achievements accompanying the Cultural Revolution, it should be recognized that many of the qualities he finds so admirable in the Chinese go far back into history. The Canadian neurosurgeon, Wilder Penfield, visited China in 1943 and again in 1962. He reported his observations in *Science* for Sept. 20, 1962, using the title "Oriental Renaissance in Education and Medicine." "The people," he said, "are temperate, frugal, puritanical, and remarkably law-abiding." Of the practitioners of acupuncture and herbs, he wrote:

The so-called traditional doctors are physicians of an ancient school. They are not witch doctors, nor are they charlatans. They have textbooks and records of experience. They do not operate, unless penetrating the skin with a needle may be called that. They do administer herbs. They counsel and reassure, and they are remarkably skilled in the treatment of fractures.

There is general agreement between the earlier report of this Canadian physician and Dr. Dimond's book.

COMMENTARY

LEFT TO DO

IN his introduction to the Harper paperback edition of Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Huston Smith described the Platonic theory of knowledge with brief clarity:

The degrees of knowing are three. At bottom is opinion, or as we should say, observation. As this is constantly changing it grasps nothing permanent and worthy of being called "truth." The only knowledge fully deserving the name stands at the opposite end of the ladder, wholly transcending the senses, it is the contemplation by pure intelligence of the divine archetypes, above all the summum bonum, the Idea of the Good. The overlap of these two modes of knowing, sensory and intellectual, results in an intermediate activity that Plato stigmatized as "bastard," though as a stepping stone to true knowledge it was invaluable. This middle knowledge was geometry, or as we should now say, deduction.

While, unlike "opinion," geometry or science is not "constantly changing," it is subject to periodic revision—as a result, in our time, of changes in the system of geometry and in its applications in science. J. Bronowski's essay, "The Logic of the Mind" (*American Scholar*, Spring, 1966), is devoted to showing, à la Gödel's theorem, that after a time science or some branch of science breaks down, requiring new or changed assumptions in order to make a new start.

Aristotle parted with Plato on the idea that the archetypal forms are alone unchanging knowledge. He held that all knowledge begins with sense perception. As Huston Smith says:

Aristotle spoke for the many in this regard and in so doing effected, against his teacher Plato, the basic divide in Western philosophy. For Plato forms were concrete [substantially real] and existed in their own right, for Aristotle they existed only as aspects of materialized objects. Correlatively, for Plato the infinite was real, whereas for Aristotle it was a potentiality. Thus Aristotelianism may be regarded as a kind of external or exoteric rendering of Platonism, the line running through Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Plotinus.

Scientific knowledge, based on observation and developed by deduction, relies on objectivity, requires intellectual effort and discipline, has endless practical applications, yet breaks down. Wisdom relies on intuitive illumination, is born from moral integrity, requires intellectual effort and discipline, and it does not break down. Yet agreement on what is wisdom is difficult to obtain, since it is subjective and requires sacrifice, which makes the wise very few in number. But pursuing wisdom, if only to avert scientific disaster, seems the only thing left to do.

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

EDUCATIONAL CORNUCOPIA

THE first book we read on "open education" was a good one. Now that books on this subject seem to come out all the time we are beginning to wonder if there ought to be a law. . . . Good topics can be written to death. . . . The one we have now may be a fine book, but we reached for it with a certain reluctance. Luckily, it opened to a page which said what can't be said too often:

It is still safe to say that *local professionals*—for better or for worse—bear the burden of developing and improving British primary education.

Change occurred in Great Britain, therefore, gradually—almost gently—coming largely from within, occurring here and there, in pockets where conditions for change were ripe, not monolithically or on a grand scale. John Coe, the perceptive, articulate head of primary education in the county of Oxfordshire, is fond of telling the story of Edith Moorhouse, one of the great early leaders of the movement toward informal education in that lovely region, as she sat in the evenings at her home with a small group of primary headmistresses and teachers, knitting and talking about children. There were no elaborate lists of goals and objectives to be achieved, deadlines to be met, nor tests to be given. Rather there was good talk about children, how they learn and grow, and what this might mean to teachers.

This is Vincent R. Rogers, who contributes a chapter, "Using the British Experience," to *Studies in Open Education* (Agathon, 1975, \$12.00) edited by Bernard Spodek and Herbert J. Walberg. According to this book, Mr. Rogers was active in the curriculum reform movement of the 1960's, and has since become active in educational projects in Africa and Italy. Conceivably, another chapter, "Five First-Year Teachers Attempting Open Education" (in America), gives the reason why Mr. Rogers finds Africa and Italy attractive places to work. The article about the five teachers presents nineteen reasons (with sixty-three supporting examples) why these teachers, who had studied open

education in England, were unable to get it going in their schools in the United States.

The real trouble, it seems almost certain, was that they didn't find a pocket "where conditions for change were ripe."

The pockets exist in America, but they are not like the pockets that developed in England. Consider for example the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in Georgia, where Eliot Wigginton teaches journalism to highschool students, and where, about ten years ago, *Foxfire* magazine was born. A high school is different from primary grades, but the kind of pocket Eliot Wigginton created in Rabun Gap might have been possible with younger children.

There are now three *Foxfire* books (all Anchor) which tell how this pocket in Georgia grew into an educational cornucopia. The first book has now sold about a million copies, so perhaps most MANAS readers know about it. But for those who don't, Eliot Wigginton was teaching—trying to teach—youngsters who were wholly uninterested. They couldn't seem to get excited about much of anything, and if you can't get excited about something, writing about it is practically impossible. But Wigginton was determined. He got his students to look around the countryside, to see how their grandmas and grandpas back in the hills were making quilts and banjos, and how they churned butter, gathered ginseng, and tanned hides. Before long the project became a great adventure and they started a magazine—*Foxfire*—to tell about it.

A lot of the material they gathered has been reprinted in the *Foxfire* books, which have had an enormous influence. In the introduction to *Foxfire 2*, Wigginton says:

Sometimes, on cicada nights like this, I do a lot of thinking. Mostly it's thinking about stuff that's happened since the first *Foxfire Book* came out—about letters we've gotten, schools we've seen, groups we've visited and talked with. We made some good friends through that book—friends who intuitively understood what we were saying, knew they were

saying it too (though in different ways), and got in touch. And sometimes I am overwhelmed by optimism when I watch them at work with those fragile human experiments like the Opportunity II school in San Francisco, The Young Film Makers and the *Fourth Street i* and Teachers' and Writers' Collaborative in New York City, and Interlocken's Crossroads America Program. And I know good things are happening to the kids involved. I *know* it's making a difference.

Eliot Wigginton is not unaware of the nineteen reasons (with sixty-three supporting examples) which explain why education like this is not going on all over the country:

But inevitably the optimism I feel when I dig in with these people and share their adventures—inevitably that is tempered by the sounds of human cicadas that endure and drone on and on endlessly into the night.

"I will not be late to class any more." [Write it on the blackboard. Fifty times.]

And they never understand.

Sometimes I lie awake at night and think about all that. Strange stuff to think about I know and I probably wouldn't except that it constantly colors my life and the lives of kids I care about.

What do I say, for example, in answer to the stacks of letters I get from teachers asking questions like, "My pupils are so listless, so uninterested. How can I motivate them?" Or, "I would like to start a project like yours. Would you please tell me exactly how to go about doing so from beginning to end?"

How can I answer questions like that, knowing that the only way it can work is for the teacher to push back the desks and sit down on the floor with the kids and really listen to them for the first time, and see what they can all come up with *together* that *might* work in the context of their own particular school and community—and then try to find ways to make it work for as long as it seems worth doing—and then find another. Knowing all the while most teachers won't bother to do that. Knowing they want texts and learning kits and packets that tell them how. Knowing they're missing the greatest adventure of all. And so are their kids.

How do you get to those teachers?

The Introduction to *Foxfire 3* has a somewhat different mood. It tells about all the

problems success and national publicity have made for the Foxfire project. Yet one gets the impression that they're going to survive:

The problem, of course, becomes to figure out a way to grab the thing called success, shake it up, turn it inside out, and make it work for us instead of letting it eat us alive. Here's the system we've devised for the moment. . . . If the request asks me to come and speak, I ask a couple of questions in return. Is the group that's inviting me willing, for example, to foot not only my expenses, but also those of two or three of the students? If they aren't, I usually don't go. . . . If it's a group of English teachers from the state of North Carolina that are really looking for some ways to get their kids involved, or a high school in Parkersburg, West Virginia, that wants to start a similar project and wants me to come and help it get off the ground; if we can spare the time away from the office, and if it's not during one of those months we periodically set aside *just* for the kids here and let nothing else interfere, then we might go. . . .

The youngsters have similar problems. Television appearances and speaking dates—being on exhibition—are some of the penalties exacted from young people who are part of a project which gains national attention. Wigginton feels that there is no use trying to shield them from these influences. This is a part of the society in which they will grow up—the society that needs changing. The young will need to develop the same sort of immunity to fame that Wigginton has acquired, and to apply the same standards that he uses in deciding what to do.

FRONTIERS

Urban Food Production

SINCE only about four per cent of the people of the United States still live in the country, and the rest in large towns and cities, reports of innovative change in rural areas, it is sometimes argued, are not of much importance. Various things might be said in reply—that, for example, city-dwellers enjoy reading about people who have returned to the land, and some of them wonder seriously about making similar moves; that everyone ought to know something about how food is grown, whether or not they are able to grow their own.

A more complete answer is given in the "Plowboy Interview" in *Mother Earth News* for last November, which tells about people in a "generally deteriorating" area of Washington, D.C., who have found a way to grow their own food without leaving the city. The facts of this achievement emerge in conversation with David Morris and Gil Friend, active members of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a non-profit foundation established in the Adams-Morgan area of Washington in 1973. The *Mother Earth* introductory note says:

The ILSR's work has—so far—included experiments with imaginative new ways to produce, process, and distribute food right in urban neighborhoods . . . the promotion of solar energy for do-it-yourself city use . . . the organization of creative community government on a grass-roots level . . . and publication of a wide variety of "how-to" material about the foregoing projects.

When the ILSR members first talked to their neighbors about producing their own food they were laughed at. Who could go back to the land under paved city streets! But after some explanation a group of people got to work on the idea. According to Gil Friend, a young man of twenty-three:

. . . it wasn't difficult once we had rephrased society's problems in city terms. Our neighbors understand the city because that's where they live and where most of them will continue to live. The city is

where they eat their food and where they produce the waste products which, in any sane agricultural system, would be recycled back to the land and used as fertilizer to produce more food.

Right now, you know, we city residents import what we eat from the country . . . sometimes from hundreds of miles away. We ship our food in at great expense and then we spend even more money on costly processing which often hurts its nutritional value. Then we turn right around and export our wastes long distances—again, at great cost—and dump those wastes into our rivers and lakes . . . which are killed in the process.

Once we had explained this so that people here in Adams-Morgan could see how it affected their lives, the rest was easy. Our neighbors became receptive to the idea that we could shorten the pathways which brought our food in and took our wastes away. They understood that "local control" meant having a bigger say—individually and collectively—in how our community handled the food it ate and used the energy it needed.

The rest followed naturally and, before long, we had a core group interested in growing fresh food—food which, because it *was* fresh, had a higher nutritional value—right here in the neighborhood. And that led us to thinking about how easy—and natural—it would be to recycle our wastes back into our gardens. This is the way nature has worked for billions of years, as you know. All we're doing is trying to reproduce that natural cycle on a local level. We're just shortening the pathways of what we eat and what we expel into self-sustaining and permanent loops. Loops which we directly control on a neighborhood level.

Where do they grow this "fresh food"? There's little vacant land in Adams-Morgan, so they use rooftops and basements. A city's most unused resource, Gil Friend says, along with the wastes that are thrown away, is its rooftops—acres and acres of them. Unfortunately, the old buildings in that part of Washington, D.C., are now a bit frail and won't support a lot of soil, so ILSR has been constructing hydroponic gardens, using chemical nutrients reinforced with organic materials generated from community wastes. The experimenters don't especially like using chemicals, so they keep working to invent very light soils that the roofs will support. The organic

materials are added in the form of a compost "tea" derived from vegetable wastes collected from nearby community food stores—500 pounds a week, which makes a lot of compost.

Other areas for growing things are backyards, vacant lots, and basements:

Basements are the ideal place to grow sprouts . . . which are one of the most nutritious forms of food available. Seeds, beans, and nuts are highly concentrated storehouses of food, but they're usually rather difficult—if not impossible—for anybody but a horse or a cow to digest. The traditional ways of preparing them for human consumption is by grinding—such as is usually done with wheat or corn—or boiling . . . as in the case of rice.

But grinding exposes the nutrients within a seed to oxidation—which is destructive—and boiling also lowers nutritional value because, among other things, the B-vitamins are water soluble and vitamin C is sensitive to heat. Sprouts, on the other hand, are even better food than the seeds they come from, because some good things happen during the chemistry of sprouting.

The ILSR sprouts specialist raises mainly alfalfa, mung bean, and lentil sprouts, in quantities totalling about 180 pounds a week, or five tons annually. After subtracting costs, including a charge for labor, the sprouts business brings in an income of between seven and eight thousand dollars a year.

They also tried raising food fish in basements. Gil Friend says:

Much of the work has been done with rainbow trout, but I now believe that's a rather unfortunate choice bc-cause trout require high protein food and low water temperatures, which forces you into the expense of buying special food and operating cooling equipment.

The people at New Alchemy Institute at Woods Hole, Massachusetts—on the other hand—have been working with tilapia . . . a warm-water fish related to catfish. Not only can this species live in warmer water than trout . . . it thrives on algae, insect larvae, and table scraps. Raising tilapia in urban basements would be one good way to recycle some of our organic waste into usable animal protein.

The interview goes on, telling about the ILSR programs for waste recycling, solar energy, and the reorganization of community needs on the basis of self-sufficiency. The objective is to develop various modes of a self-reliant life, and to use them as examples in a wide-ranging educational program.

How did they get going in this direction? Gil Friend explains:

. . . no matter how big a look we took at the whole picture, the only solutions we came up with were all *small* solutions. Decentralist solutions. The final answer always seemed to be that we should develop our communities so that food and energy production could be handled on a neighborhood level. . . . the only reason these grassroots solutions haven't been implemented already is that they're not in the interests of organized political and economic power. But that *has* to change . . . and work on a local level—on a community level—seems, in a lot of ways, to be the best way to bring about the necessary changes.