

## AMERICA, THE UNPREDICTABLE

TWO enduring questions arise naturally and become insistent from a reading of three articles in the last December *Harper's*. One question asks what the United States as a military power is likely to undertake in the future. The other, more ultimate question is whether or not there can ever be a world without war. Answers to both questions are difficult and uncertain. What America may do with its now incalculable power to destroy is unpredictable because Americans, a people of manifestly contradictory tendencies, are as much a mystery to themselves as to the rest of the world.

The answer to the second question—whether world peace is possible, and if so how it may be made to come about—seems to involve metaphysical assumptions about the nature of man and the meaning of his enterprises on earth. It is evident, at any rate, that most of the believers in and workers for world peace ground their hope on religio-philosophical assumptions. They tend to regard the human presence in the world as a moral drama in which peace will be a fulfilling concomitant of true self-realization. They do not, therefore, lose heart because of practical discouragements.

Gandhi may be taken as an exemplar of this outlook. He said in an article which appeared in *Liberty* for April 5, 1941:

The world of tomorrow as I see it will be, must be, a society based on non-violence. That is the first law, for it is out of that law that all other blessings will flow. It may seem a distant goal indeed, an unattainable Utopia, it is often criticized as such. But I do not think it is in the least unattainable, since it can be worked for here and now. I believe it to be perfectly possible for an individual to adopt the way of life of the future—the non-violent way—without having to wait for others to do so. And if an individual can observe a certain rule of conduct,

cannot a group of individuals do the same? Cannot whole groups of peoples—whole nations?

I think it is necessary to emphasize this fact: No one need wait for anyone else to adopt a humane and enlightened course of action. Men generally hesitate to make a beginning if they feel that the objective cannot be achieved in its entirety. It is precisely this attitude of mind that is the greatest obstacle to progress—an obstacle that each man, if he only wills it, can clear away himself, and so influence others.

Gandhi here reveals himself as an evolutionist—a moral evolutionist. Going on, he said:

But does not this—indeed does not the whole idea of nonviolence imply a change in human nature? I answer emphatically that there have been such changes in single men from the mean, personal, acquisitive point of view to one that sees society as a whole and works for its benefit. If there has been such a change in one man, there can be the same change in many.

This, briefly and clearly put, is the case for working toward world peace.

Less than fifty years earlier, Tolstoy, another great champion of world peace, declared the same credo in other words. He wrote in *Christianity and Patriotism* (1894):

One free man says truthfully what he thinks and feels in the midst of thousands of men who by their words and actions are maintaining the exact opposite. It might be supposed that the man who has spoken out his thoughts sincerely would remain a solitary figure, and yet what more often happens is that the others, or a large proportion of them, have for long past been thinking and feeling exactly the same, only they do not say so freely. And what was yesterday the new opinion of one man, becomes today the public opinion of the majority. And as soon as this opinion becomes established, at once, gradually, imperceptibly, but irresistibly, men begin to alter their conduct. . . .

If only free men would not rely on that which has not strength and is never free—on external

power, but would believe in what is always powerful and free—in truth and the expression of it. If only men would boldly and clearly speak out the truth that has already been revealed to them of the brotherhood of all nations and the criminality of exclusive devotion to one's own nation, the dead false public opinion upon which all the power of Governments and all the evil produced by them rests would drop off of itself like dried skin, and make way for the new living public opinion which only waits that dropping off of the old husk . . . in order to assert its claim openly and with authority, and to establish new forms of life that are in harmony with the consciences of men.

Such is the vision, the hope, and the goal of workers for world peace. As to how it is to be reached—by what means of persuasion and demonstration—there are many and wide differences of opinion, yet what seems clear is that these people—the ones who have seriously committed themselves to peace—go on working, year after year, and while their accomplishments may seem slight in comparison with current events, they are having an effect. Even though, as one historian of the American peace movement (Merle Curti) has said, the activities of peacemakers seem "mere chips and foam on the surface of the stream of American life," their ideas are slowly spreading. "Nonviolent" now belongs to the vocabulary of the time, and is increasingly a basis for action. The non-violent platforms adopted by groups in the West may be lacking in both Gandhian purity and Gandhian understanding and commitment, but the application of this principle, however imperfectly, and with what ever mixed motives, often leads to a better understanding of what it means. Meanwhile, as the anti-nuclear demonstrations in European capitals last Fall showed, the peace idea is becoming a factor which governments must take into account. How much of such "uprisings" is due to natural panic at the prospect of Europe being made into a nuclear battlefield and how much they bespeak a changing attitude toward all war remains to be seen.

What about the United States as a nation which periodically becomes involved in war? Two

of the articles in the December *Harper's* deal with the present policies and preparations of this country. One of them, "American Miscellany" by Matthew Stevenson, takes note of a presidential address last Spring to the graduating class at West Point, in which the heroics of military duty and glory had full play. "War, in this vision," Mr. Stevenson remarks, "is always worth fighting, and generals are always pithy and bold." One gets the impression, he says, "that many think war a desirable state that will somehow perform the magic of halting what is perceived to be the nation's moral decline."

From this romantic picture of war the writer goes to "the actual landscape of battle," selecting for contrast the horrors of the Civil War which tore this nation apart for five years. The choice is appropriate. Through the heartfelt reportage of Walt Whitman, the Civil War put an end to the classical manner of writing about war. As a dazed civilian, working in military hospitals, Whitman saw the amputation of gangrenous limbs, smelt the ether, and knew the pain. On the battlefields he watched men crawl behind bushes to die and wrote last letters home for expiring soldiers. By compulsion of the spirit he did for the Civil War what John Hersey did for Hiroshima, some eighty years later, as a literary *tour de force*.

Mr. Stevenson quotes eye witnesses. In May, 1864, Grant ordered 20,000 men to attack the Confederate line at Spotsylvania, in Virginia. Wave after wave of Union soldiers charged the trenches. A Pennsylvania private said: "The dead and the wounded were torn to pieces by the canister as it swept the ground where they had fallen. The mud was halfway to our knees. . . . Our losses were frightful." A Union general said: "Nothing but piled up logs or breastworks separated the combatants. Our men would reach over the logs and fire into the faces of the enemy, and would stab with their bayonets; . . . men mounted the works and with muskets rapidly handed them kept up a continuous fire until they were shot down, when others would take their

places." Stevenson says: "At Spotsylvania and the Wilderness alone, the casualties on both sides were 70,000—the arithmetic by which Grant would win the war—but the fighting lasted almost another year." And "on the march from the Rapidan to Appomattox more men were lost than were killed in either the Korean or Vietnam wars."

The nightmare campaign which General Grant began in May, 1864, was, according to his biographer, "a hideous disaster in every respect save one—it worked." Col. Horace Porter, a Union staff officer, during the fighting at the Wilderness came upon "a group of men apparently mending their uniforms in the thick of the fight. What they were actually doing was stitching their names to their clothing in the hope that word might get back to their families when they were killed." Porter also described the fires that broke out in the forest at the Wilderness, "trapping the wounded in a cauldron fed by leaves and branches." Porter continued: "Forest fires raged; ammunition trains exploded; the dead were roasted in the conflagration; the wounded, roused by its hot breath, dragged themselves along, with their torn and mangled limbs, in the mad energy of despair, to escape the ravages of the flames; and every bush seemed hung with shreds of blood-stained clothing." It was, he said, as though "Christian men had turned to fiends, and hell itself had usurped the place of earth." These are some of the realities of the Civil War, in which Grant "fed men to the guns in what seems like an overture to 1914." Stevenson quotes Stephen Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage*, who called such fighting "the delirium that encounters despair and death, and is heedless and blind to the odds." Crane, he says, "wanted to dispel forever any illusion to the effect that war is somehow a series of Homeric confrontations."

Well, that needs to be done, but war-makers are wholly indifferent to such appeals. Horror stories may have their uses, but they don't stop war. The other *Harper's* article is "Invisible Wars," an examination by Gene Lyons of

Pentagon plans for use of "binary nerve gas," an admittedly "unpopular" weapon even among soldiers, yet ready in supply, awaiting executive decision. Lyons says:

"Binary" means simply that instead of containing a live agent, the new generation of weapons—not just artillery shells but bombs, missile warheads, rockets, land mines, and spray tanks—would contain two "nonlethal" chemical precursors that would become a deadly compound only after the weapon was fired. . . . Nerve gas kills everything with a nervous system that is not equipped with a protective suit and a gas mask: women, children, cats and dogs, rabbits in the fields, and birds in the trees. One good lungful or as little as a drop on exposed skin of the colorless, odorless, tasteless gas blocks the action of the enzyme acetylcholinesterase at the nerve endings. Every muscle in the body contracts and cannot relax: victims are said to be "stimulated to death." Outward symptoms are intense sweating, mucus clogging the bronchial passages, loss of vision, simultaneous and uncontrollable vomiting and defecation, convulsions paralysis, and, finally, inability to breathe. The fortunate die in minutes; victims who get smaller lethal doses may linger for hours.

The sheep (more than six thousand) which died in 1968 in Utah were killed by an accident releasing twenty pounds of nerve gas. Army advocates of this weapon assert that hostility to gas warfare is an irrational dread that dates from "the Middle Ages and the view of chemistry as witchcraft." An artillery officer told Lyons bluffly: "You've got to have confidence. People who don't understand the technology have a hard time. I didn't have a lot of confidence in my wife's microwave oven, either, until she used it." Gene Lyons says of the spokesmen interviewed:

Without exception, every believer in the necessity of binary weapons whom I met was at pains to assure me that the Soviets intend to conquer the world by force, have nothing but cold-blooded contempt for our sniveling pieties, and are exactly on schedule. If you are a patriot and a man, you must leave off asking and begin believing.

Nerve gas has plenty of opposition, of course, and no one except fanatical devotees want to talk about it, but it exists and the Commander in Chief

is free to use this weapon if he thinks a war requires it. Nerve-gas, however, is regarded by some experts as dangerous to all, and one authority (retired) says it is untested, wholly unpredictable in operation, and probably wouldn't work." Gene Lyons concludes:

So there you have it, Armageddon fans, the ultimate cold-war weapon: billions of dollars and whole hurricanes of political and bureaucratic huffing and puffing for an outmoded form of mass murder that isn't needed and probably won't work. . . . One can get giddy contemplating a doomsday weapon that seems, in the final analysis, almost a joke but in truth, the whole binary debacle seems to be absolutely symptomatic of the prevailing confusion in America about what we are up to in terms of "national security." Congress is ready to go to the rhetorical wall and spend billions of dollars in order to protect Europe from the Russians by manufacturing a weapon no European country will allow us to store on its soil.

Will Americans allow themselves to be swept into war and the use of such weapons, including, of course, the nuclear missiles, or will they demand another way of settling the fierce feuds of governments? The third *Harper's* article we have in mind is "The Americans," by Luigi Barzini, a leading Italian journalist. He does not address the question we have raised, but proceeds to examine the American character in a fair-minded way. He is one of a long line of European writers, starting with the French settler Crèvecoeur, who asked in 1783, after living here for twenty years, "What then is the American, this new man?" To answer this question Alexis de Tocqueville composed his classic, *Democracy in America*, fifty years later, and other answers were given by James Bryce (1888), followed by the impressions collected in this century by Count Herman Keyserling and Carl Jung. Barzini is not unworthy of this company. For Europeans, he points out, the answer to the question "What is the United States?" is "becoming a matter of life and death." After reviewing a series of unexpected and bewildering decisions by this country, throughout more than fifty years, and adopting Henry Kissinger's claim that American foreign policy fluctuates "between

euphoria and panic," he seeks explanation in the underlying qualities of Americans.

Our population is widely varied in origin, yet all these people, he says, "are united mainly by their resolute, beaverlike determination to construct a more rational and just society, possibly one day a perfect society, which, of course, like the cathedrals of old, may never be completed." One must not, he says, be deceived by the science-fiction aspect of much of American life. Its ground is in eighteenth-century Enlightenment expectations well described by Benjamin Franklin. Barzini's generosity of mind may be responsible for what seems his exceptional insight into the American character and mood:

From Americans' deep-seated awareness that they have been entrusted with an experiment never before tried by man derive the national characteristics most baffling to Europeans. One is their lack of respect for other people's precedents and experiences, and for the past in general. The great seal of the Republic on the back of every dollar bill bears the proud motto *Novus ordo seclorum*, meaning, more or less, "The world and history begin with us". . . . Another corollary is the philanthropic missionary and didactic urge that makes America see itself as the world's best hope, the mentor, preceptor, and example to all men. One of the moral justifications for the 1776 rebellion against the mother country—besides independence—was the hope of incorporating in the new nation all modern improvements, philosophic and juridical, not only for America's benefit but also for the sake of other countries, including England. Until a few years ago, this conviction was freely, artlessly, proudly advertised. Now, of course, many people, even Americans, are incapable of faith in the task assigned by history to the United States.

Yet however muted the belief of Americans that their country has a "moral mission" to the world, and despite its extreme caricature in recent years, the feeling continues, Barzini suggests. He finds an illustration in the attitudes adopted by many in regard to the Vietnam War:

Lyndon Johnson clung desperately to the thesis that the Vietnam expedition had been a response to a liberty-loving ally who had asked for help when attacked by a foreign aggressor. He could not bear to think that his country had involved itself in what

could be interpreted as an un-American war of conquest and destruction. The Vietnam problem could not be left unsolved. A new and better country had to be set up on the ruins. The Americans' sense of mission and pride, their confidence in their power and invincibility, but above all their pragmatism, the need to finish the job at all cost, prevented them, until it was too late, from admitting they had made a mistake, and from packing up and leaving Vietnam to its tragic destiny. . . . No wonder, when the Europeans have to guess which way the United States will jump, knowing that their own future and that of the whole world are at stake, they are frightened and cautious. Will Americans be pragmatic or idealistic tomorrow?

After the second world war, Mr. Barzini says, "Europeans had no doubts that America would be able to keep the peace all over the world, as surely as Britain had kept it in the past, and that they had nothing to worry out." But now they are bewildered and anxious, since "the real America" is not behaving according to European preconception.

What can be said on the other side? Is there still another "real America" in formation? Lately we have been reading in Charles DeBenedetti's *The Peace Reform in American History* (Indiana University Press, 1980, \$18.50), an even-minded study of the struggle for peace from the days of the seventeenth-century radical reform sects which came to the new world to live peaceful and useful lives, to the conscientious objectors and Gandhians of the present. To describe the contents of his book, DeBenedetti says in his preface that there exists beneath the surface of long stretches of organized violence "a substratum of organized citizen activism which has insistently valued peace as too important to be left to prevailing authority." What seems the most striking quality of the peace movement in America is its *persistence*. At the end of the book the author remarks "the curious consistency by which the United States excels both in its capacity for violence and in its ability to sustain an active peace movement." And among his last words are these:

Most of all, however, the peace movement stands for minority reform in America because it constitutes a subculture opposed to the country's dominant power culture and power realities. The peace subculture speaks of forbearance within a culture that has flowered in conquest. It speaks of reconciliation within a society that works better at distributing weapons than wealth. . . . Rather than preparing to master the levers of national and international power, American peace seekers have progressively concluded that they would serve neither as "victims nor executioners" for those policymakers who ultimately perceive power in terms of violence. Rejecting that perception of power, peacemakers instead work to uncover other means of moving men and women to seek justice and secure order. They really operate more as pathfinders than power seekers.

The pathfinders are not many, these days, but their number is growing. The failures of violence are everywhere about, becoming more evident each year. John Holt's calculus of social change may have application here. He said in his latest book, *Teach Your Own*:

At a given moment of history, 99 per cent of a society may think and act one way on a certain matter, and only 1 per cent think and act very differently. In time, that 1 per cent may become 2 per cent, then 5 per cent, then 10, 20, 30 per cent, until finally it becomes the dominant majority, and social change has taken place.

## *REVIEW*

### WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN DO

IF the subject is agriculture, whatever you read nowadays is likely to be ominous. The news seems uniformly bad. Take for example the lead story in *Food First News* (organ of the Institute for Food and Development Policy, Fall, 1981), which reports what Frances Moore Lappé said at a Congressional hearing on farm exports last year. In its present proportion, she said, the export of farm products "is destroying our food-producing resources." These are some facts:

U.S. farm exports—which have almost tripled in volume over the last 10 years—are promoted by the government as a boon to American farmers, to the nation's trade balance and to the hungry abroad.

Yet farm exports are actually hurting many farmers and are doing much less to reduce our trade deficit than the government claims. In addition, two thirds of our exports go to feed livestock—to produce meat which hungry people cannot afford. Exporting grain to pay for imported oil is hardly the neat equation its boosters would have us believe. American agriculture used the equivalent of 25 cents in imported oil to produce each dollar's worth of farm exports in 1980, and this figure is likely to rise to 40 cents in the near future, according to our study.

Energy is not the only cost of farm exports. For every bushel of grain we ship, we are mining topsoil and underground water resources that are irreplaceable in our lifetimes. Soil erosion—in some regions already as bad as during the Dust Bowl era—is predicted to increase by 72 per cent throughout the Corn Belt by 1985 if current export trends continue.

A macabre tidbit in this issue of *Food First News* relates that the people of Nicaragua have "thirty-one times more DDT in their blood than people in the United States where DDT has been banned for over a decade." Where do they get this poison? From the pesticides sold by U.S. manufacturers and then carelessly applied to the land, in "total disregard for the safety of the people working in and near the fields." Fortunately, an American graduate student is now teaching a few Nicaraguan students in the Autonomous National University in Leon another

method of pest management for cotton crops, using non-chemical means as much as possible, which can cut pesticide use from 50 to 90 percent. (There is much more on such abuses in *Circle of Poison*, published by the Institute at \$3.95—2588 Mission St., San Francisco, Calif. 94110.) When people read or hear about such things, they sometimes say, "What Can We Do?" The Institute has a booklet with a number of useful answers to this question.

One of the Institute's earlier publications—*World Hunger: Ten Myths*—has been put into Portuguese, with some added "local color" relating to the increase in hunger and malnutrition in Brazil, result of the rapid rise in agricultural exports. The Brazilian edition says:

Over the last ten years, thousands of farmers producing beans and corn for local tables have been forced off their land to make way for large mechanized farms producing for export—\$10 billion worth this year, including \$3 billion in soybeans (mostly for cattle feed) and \$200 million in chickens. A recent study of the government's farm credit revealed that three quarters of the nation's five million farmers received no credit over the last decade, while the 12,000 largest landowning families—I per cent of the farmers—got 40 per cent of the credit.

The result: while the urban population swelled 50 per cent, the staple kidney bean harvest fell 18 per cent and the corn harvest 4 per cent during the last decade. The governors of Brazil's hungry Northeast recently protested that 80 per cent of the population there is underfed.

So, once again the question, What can we do? Today there is almost a clamor of claims concerning what should be done, some of them sounding good, yet out of reach for most individuals. Other suggestions, however, are meant for families and small communities, and these are the ones which deserve primary attention. They provide options at the grassroots level and, as they are taken up, will help to build a foundation of experience-based public opinion favorable to larger projects requiring social invention, some social engineering, but, more than

anything else, social understanding and critical assent.

Fundamental perspective for thinking about these matters is provided by Wes Jackson's book, *New Roots for Agriculture* (Friends of the Earth, 124 Spear Street, San Francisco, Calif. 94105, \$4.95 in paperback). This study gives ample confirmation to Wendell Berry's claim that agriculture is the natural matrix of culture. Wes Jackson is both a cosmopolitan and a farmer. We have been browsing in his book for several months now, turning to it often for ideas and background. Reading him seems a way of acquiring both a sense of history and a vision of possible futures for human beings.

Wes Jackson writes about the historic "agricultural revolution" and what was wrong with it. We quote his general conclusion, based on evidence amply supplied in his chapters. As you read, you realize that someone from the city who drives in his car across the country will not be able to *see* the creeping disaster in American croplands. An experienced eye and an informed mind are needed to grasp the significance of what can be observed in a trip like that. Fortunately, as one also learns from Jackson's book, we have always had such observers who set down their warnings in articulate prose. That only a small minority listens to them is another aspect of the problem, affecting the answer to the "What can I do?" question.

Jackson uses a broad canvas:

So destructive has the agricultural revolution been that, geologically speaking, it surely stands as the most significant and explosive event to appear on the face of the earth, changing the earth even faster than did the origin of life. Volcanoes erupt in small areas, and mountain ranges require so long in their uplift that adjustments to changing conditions by the life forms are smooth and easy. But agriculture has come on the global scene so rapidly that the life-support system has not had time to adjust to the changing circumstances. In this sense, then, till agriculture is a global disease, which in a few places has been well-managed, but overall has steadily eroded the land. In some areas, such as the U.S., it is

advancing at an alarming rate. Unless this disease is checked, the human race will wilt like any other crop.

Agriculture has been given every chance to prove itself as *a viable experiment for continuously sustaining a large standing crop of humans*. Its failure to do so is difficult to comprehend because since Jamestown, each decade, if not each year, we North Americans have harvested more and more food. In spite of all our scientific and technological cleverness of recent decades, *not one significant breakthrough* has been advanced for a truly *sustainable* agriculture that is at once *healthful* and sufficiently *compelling* to be employed by a stable population, let alone an exploding one. Even when we do think deeply about the problem, we are inclined to accept the eventual decline of agriculture as being in the nature of a tragedy in drama—inevitable.

We live in a time when, little by little, we are gaining perspective on ourselves and what we have been doing. This book is a good example. While one by one the follies of civilization are becoming evident, forced on our attention by the price we are paying for them—through war, pollution, and waste at the same time thoughtful men and women, often with training as scientific observers, are providing the perspective necessary to make intelligent decision about the role and responsibility of humans on earth. In the area of agriculture, Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America* is one such exercise in self-understanding and criticism; and now we have another in Wes Jackson's *New Roots for Agriculture*.

His chapter titles are revealing. After a generalized history of the planet and information about how soil is formed, he describes the sudden growth in productivity of American agriculture. This is called "The Failure of Success":

In the twenty years from 1949, American agriculture increased its output fifty per cent. During the same period of time, it was withholding from production a net land area of fifteen per cent, totaling fifty-eight million acres. Land was also being taken for the construction of a massive automobile transportation system and for urbanization. However, agricultural yields increased six per cent per year, more than offsetting land loss. We grow increasingly more food on fewer acres and, in 1978, exported over twenty-seven billion dollars' worth of farm products a

year on a planet where people are hungry and starve by the millions. There is a strong temptation for us to believe we must be doing something right.

Then—

At the time when we had seriously depleted the life-giving capability of the land, American agriculture began the heavy fossil-fuel chemotherapy which has given us all a false sense of the health of the agricultural system, even as it is being poisoned and further depleted. At the moment, we are poisoning the North American continent with pesticides and fertilizers, salting millions of acres through irrigation, and promoting erosion, through our methods of cultivation, of tens of millions of acres and top cropland.

In principle, these mistakes were foreseen by "prophets" of long ago, but their warnings had little influence. There is a chapter on this. Another chapter describes the failure of organized efforts, such as the admirable Soil Conservation Service, begun in 1940, which started out strong, but eventually lost its vital audience of farmers. Two things, Jackson says, are now needed. He goes back to Aldo Leopold's idea of a land ethic (urged in *A Sand County Almanac*) to show that both love and understanding of the land are required. The understanding will point to what needs to be done. His last chapters spell these necessities out in ways that provide, not answers, but leads to answers, on what individuals can do.



**COMMENTARY**  
**ACCEPTANCE OF MYSTERIES**

THE candid investigation of the nature of "character" by Robert Coles in his *Dædalus* article (see "Children") might be taken as a sign of coming cultural health. His work represents the admission of a reality that has no definition in scientific terms, saying, in effect, that our inability to "explain it away" is simply evidence of our ignorance, not of the nonexistence of "character." The term is indispensably useful as a name for a constellation of non-physical ingredients which are both mysterious and real.

This is a discovery that should eventually give new life to the Humanities. For what is literature but the record of what human beings have learned about how to live with certain manifest mysteries? A psychology which recognizes the unique value of this capacity is a psychology of health and synthesis, based upon distinctive but mechanistically undefinable human realities. A. H. Maslow laid the foundation for such a psychology, and a few others have since made additions. Quite evidently, Dr. Coles is an important contributor.

Meanwhile it seems worth noting here that Arthur Morgan devoted his whole life to understanding the genesis of character, and while it cannot be said that he succeeded, he did locate in the small community the kind of environment where character has the best chance of development. Some of his conclusions are recorded in Morgan's best and briefest book, *The Long Road*, available (at about \$3.00) from Community Service, Inc. (P.O. Box 243, Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387).

Interestingly, while there may not be evident correlation between character and genius, these two ways of describing unusual humans have in common that they are both psychological mysteries. Dr. Coles has made clear our ignorance of character, and Lewis Terman

summed up his research (*Genetic Studies of Genius*) by saying:

Recent developments of measuring intelligence have furnished conclusive proof that native differences in endowment are a universal phenomenon, and that it is impossible to evaluate them. . . . The problems of genius lie in its nature, its origin, and cultivation. . . . Our positive knowledge of the physical, mental, and personality traits of gifted children has been extremely limited. . . . To what extent genius can be created or destroyed by right or wrong training is entirely unknown. (1, vii, viii.)

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves PARADIGM SHIFT

THE article, "On the Nature of Character," by Robert Coles in the Fall 1981 issue of *Daedalus* is both strong and inconclusive. The strength is in showing the importance of inquiry into the meaning of "character," while the inconclusiveness reveals the fact that character is something of a mystery and likely to remain so. Professionally a child psychiatrist, Dr. Coles tells why the subject interests him:

In my own working life the question of "character" came up in the early 1960s when my wife and I were getting to know the black children who initiated school desegregation in the South, often against high odds—mob violence, even—and the young men and women who made up the nonviolent sit-in movement. I remember the clinical appraisals, psychological histories, and socioeconomic comments I wrote then. I remember my continuing effort to *characterize* those children, those youths—as if one weighty, academically acceptable adjective after another would, in sum, do the job. Ruby was from a "culturally deprived," a "culturally disadvantaged," family. Tessie's grandmother was illiterate. Lawrence was counterphobic, suffering "deep down" from a mix of anxiety and depression. Martha "projected" a lot. George was prone to "reaction-formations." Jim seemed to have a character disorder, even a "borderline personality." Fred might well become psychotic later on. Meanwhile, these youthful American citizens were walking past grown men and women who were calling them the foulest of names, who were even threatening to kill them—and such hecklers were escaping sociological and psychological scrutiny in the bargain, while any number of judges were ordering "evaluations" by my kind to be done on sit-in students who were violating (segregationist) laws, and who were thought to be (and eventually declared by doctors to be) "sick" or "delinquent" or "troubled" or "sociopathic" or "psychopathic." A historic crisis had confronted a region politically, and in so doing, had ripped open the political, economic, racial aspects of our manner of judging others—the direct connection between what the Bible calls "principalities and powers," and what in our everyday life is "normal" or "proper" behavior. One day, as I mumbled some statements

suffused with the words of psychiatric theory to "explain" a given child's behavior, my wife said, "You are making her sound as if she ought to be on her way to a child guidance clinic, but she is walking into a school building—and no matter the threats, she is holding her head up high, even smiling at her obscene hecklers. Last night she even prayed for them!"

It was my wife's judgment that Ruby Bridges, aged six, was demonstrating to all the world *character*.

This is enough to show that Dr. Coles is worth reading—even if you haven't come across his *Children of Crisis* (issued in five volumes over ten years). Whatever its cause, character is essential humanness, in its best meaning what Maslow called self-actualization, and it ought to be the central concern of those who work on problems of mind and the emotions. Except for a handful of unusual psychologists and psychiatrists, the professionals in the field ignore the question of character, as though it didn't exist. Dr. Coles notes that they talk about "character disorders" a great deal, but say little or nothing about character itself.

Another reason for thinking that Dr. Coles is worth reading is his open admiration of Simone Weil. It is much easier to give examples of the meaning of character than to define it in words. Regardless of foible or "impracticality," Simone Weil had character of heroic dimensions, and she was also exceedingly bright, which makes an extraordinary combination.

Dr. Coles begins his discussion with some past history of attention to—but mostly neglect of—the subject of character. Gordon Allport, who taught psychology at Harvard after World War II, was one of the few who told his students how character was being professionally ignored. Speaking of Allport, Coles says:

He was forever anxious to acknowledge Freud's perceptive, trenchant thrusts into the outer precincts of consciousness, while at the same time remind us what Freud could afford to ignore about himself and certain others: a moral center that was, quite simply, *there*. No amount of psychoanalysis, even an

interminable stretch of it, Allport cautioned us—drawing on Freud's givens with respect to human development—can provide a strong conscience to a person who has grown up in such a fashion as to become chronically dishonest, mean-spirited, a liar. "Psychoanalysis can provide insight, can help us overcome inhibitions," we were told, "but it was not meant to be an instrument of 'character building'." I found recently my old college notes, found that sentence. I had put a big question mark above the phrase "character building," as if to say: "What is it, really?" I had heard the expression often enough in the Boy Scouts, in Sunday School, and, not least, from my somewhat Puritanical parents. They set great store by virtues they referred to as self-discipline, responsibility, honesty (often described as "the best policy"), and not least, the one my mother most commonly mentioned, "good conduct." Could it be that a social *scientist*, in the middle of the twentieth century, was mentioning such qualities in a college lecture—was in fact, asking us to consider how they might be evaluated in people, with some accuracy and consistency?

He quotes Wilhelm Reich, who thought that, "In the main character proves to be a narcissistic defense mechanism," commenting dryly that "there is more to the assessment of human beings than an analysis (even one "in-depth") of narcissistic defense mechanism can provide." Allport had said that "character is personality evaluated," and Dr. Coles proposes that this formulation "may make up, in its everyday usefulness, for whatever is lost so far as 'psychodynamic relevance' goes."

The idea of "character" needs revival and its constituents need investigation. As Coles says:

How we go about that evaluation is a matter of great import. In recent years character has been of little concern for many of us whose interest is mental life, or the social and cultural life of human beings. The very word may suggest a prescientific age; may remind us of pietistic avowals or moralistic banalities many of us have tried to put behind us; may bring up the spectre of a word being used to protect the privileges of the well-born, the powerful—as if what is at issue is etiquette, polish, a certain appearance or manner of talking and carrying oneself. How much fairer, some say, to judge people through their academic performance, or through standardized tests: no risk of subjectivity, not to mention self-serving

partiality. Still, it is not only Emerson, in another age, who suggested that "character is higher than intellect," and who observed that "a great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think." Walker Percy today reminds us of those "who get all A's and flunk life."

How is character developed? We don't know. Obviously, Dr. Coles is going to find out what he can, and we wish him well on this enterprise, hoping that he will publish some of his findings. That he intends to is suggested by his sub-title: "Some preliminary Field Notes."

## FRONTIERS

### Reform of Science: Progress Report

UNDERSTANDING and redefinition of Science—a paramount need in our time—is moving along with increasing courage and penetration, despite the fears of the rank and file scientists, those whom Maslow referred to as the "normal scientists" in contrast to the "breakthrough" scientists. Books like Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (1958) and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) are landmark studies of the changes now going on. An important forerunner in this sort of thinking was Ortega y Gasset, who as long ago as 1930 showed the necessity for separating the philosophy we need to live by from scientific doctrines. A philosophy of life may—indeed must—use scientific ideas, but as a matter of choice and not in submission.

In *Mission of the University* (translation published by Princeton University Press in 1944) Ortega wrote:

Culture . . . borrows from science what is vitally necessary for the interpretation of our existence. There are entire portions of science which are not culture but pure scientific technique. This sharpens the distinction between culture and science. Science is not something by which we live. If the physicist had to live by the ideas of his science, you may rest assured that he would not be so finicky as to wait for some other investigator to complete his research a century or so later. He would renounce the hope of a complete scientific solution, and fill in, with approximate or probable anticipations, what the rigorous corpus of physical doctrine lacks at present, and in part, will always lack.

The internal conduct of science is not a *vital* concern, that of culture is. Science is indifferent to the exigencies of our life, and follows its own necessities. Accordingly, science grows constantly more diversified and specialized without limit, and is never completed. But culture is subservient to our life here and now, and is required to be, at every instant, a complete, unified, coherent system—the plan of life, the path leading through the forest of existence.

Then, two years later, in "History as a System" (part of *Toward a Philosophy of History*), he said:

Today we are beginning to see that physics is a mental combination and nothing more . . . Physics brings us into contact with no transcendence . . . What is real in it—and not mere idea—is only its utility. That is why we have lost our fear of physics, and with our fear our respect, and with respect, our enthusiasm.

Some of these critical themes—and various others—are thoroughly explored in Maslow's *Psychology of Science* (1966), in which the author sets out to broaden the field of legitimate scientific inquiry to include subjective experience, which would place "values" within the scientific purview and make understanding of the possibilities of transcendence a scientific goal. Despite the obvious difficulties of this sort of science, Maslow's conception has immediate and dramatic appeal, and both its hazards and its moral power become evident in the resulting attempt to reform science along these lines.

Another pioneer in the drive to widen the scope of science is Willis Harman, of the Stanford Research Institute, who declared in "The New Copernican Revolution" (*Stanford Today*, Winter 1969):

Much evidence suggests that a group of questions relating to the commonality of and interpretation of man's subjective experience, especially of the "transcendental," and hence to the bases of human values, are shifting from the realm of the "philosophical" to the "empirical." If so, the consequences may be even more far-reaching than those which emerged from the Copernican, Darwinian, and Freudian revolutions.

With this idea in mind one might turn to a far-reaching example of this "shift" in Maslow's *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Viking, 1971), in the chapter, "Fusions of Facts and Values". Harman also said in his 1969 paper:

To whatever extent the science of the past may have contributed to a mechanistic and economic man, the new science of subjective experience may provide a counteracting force toward ennobling of the image

of the individual's possibilities, of the educational and socializing processes, and of the future. And if we have come to understand that science is not a description of "reality" but a metaphorical ordering of experience, the new science does not impugn the old. It is not a question of which view is "true" in some ultimate sense. Rather it is a matter of which picture is more useful in guiding human affairs.

In the Summer 1981 *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* Prof. Harman presents a survey and summary of "recent findings in psychological and psychic research." He puts them as four "tentative conclusions":

1. Ordinary conscious awareness comprises only a small portion of the total activity of the human mind.
2. Mind is not brain; the abilities of the mind are not limited in ways that would be implied by physical models of the human brain.
3. The potentialities of creative/intuitive problem-solving and choice guidance are far more vast than is ordinarily assumed.
4. The realm of the spiritual is a valid and important part of total human experience, which needs somehow to be accommodated in any society's knowledge system.

Recently accumulated evidence for these conclusions—in books and articles—is everywhere about. (On the idea that mind is not brain, see for example Wilder Penfield's *Mystery of the Mind*, 1975.)

Harman shows that organized bodies of knowledge differ greatly according to how they are intended to be used. Knowledge for *prediction and control* is by no means the same as knowledge *to guide human development*, while the *search for meaning* is again different in what it accumulates. The importance of these distinctions becomes self-evident. Knowledge for guidance will hardly be discovered in prediction-and-control disciplines, calling, instead, for study of "exceptional human qualities"—of the "gold medalists," as Maslow put it.

Willis Harman's article deserves careful reading in full. He describes the topography of

the plateau that has been reached by means of these studies, giving a clear account of what this achievement means. In one place he says:

The weight of scientific opinion of the first half of the 20th century was to the effect that we should deny the authenticity of our own inner experience and defer to the greater truth of materialistic science. More recently, however, we have seen increasing interest in attempting to complement the exploration of the measurable, physical world with a systematic exploration of consciousness and the unconscious processes. There has been growing recognition of the potential validity of both inner and outer inquiries and the potentiality of being deceived in either case. We are in the process of shifting from the dictum of Lord Kelvin (that only if you can measure it can you talk about it) to the dictum of the French poet Saint-Exupery: "Truth is not that which is demonstrable. Truth is that which is ineluctable"—that which cannot be escaped.

We are already noticeably along the way in this direction, Harman says. The prospect is inspiring, yet needing special attention to "the potential validity of being deceived in either case." A look at the wares on present-day newsstands confirms the importance of this warning.