WHAT IS MAN?

AN ADDRESS BY

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THE air is full of questions about post-war education. Will we have a plan ready for the returning soldiers? Will the Federal Government finance higher education? Will federal aid mean federal control? What is the state of liberal education? Are the humanities dead? There is an endless procession of queries.

The first impact of war upon education is dislocation. There is no need in this place and at this time to elaborate that point. The long-run influence of the war on education is only one phase of its effect upon the whole political, social, moral, and economic structure. That the world will be altered in many respects no one can doubt. Cultural monuments have been destroyed which can never be replaced. Lives have been snuffed out which would have made new contributions to art, music, literature, science, and enterprise. Treasure has been squandered which might have been directed to constructive ends. As the world is changed, the institutions which serve it will also be modified. If the change is profound, the modifications will be sweeping.

Education has survived many wars, however. It is not only a long-term enterprise; it is a permanent enterprise.
Our best contribution to the post-war world will come if we do not try to answer essentially superficial questions before the situation is ripe for considered responses. Instead, we should ask the fundamental questions, questions which should be asked more insistently now than they were before the war, questions which are relevant to the meaning of the war itself, and questions which will still be asked after this war is embodied in the pages of history, after its wounds are healed and the scars overgrown.

The issue which dominates all others is the human situation. It defines our fundamental problem in education. Yet the basic question in relation to it is all too seldom asked. It can be stated in the terms of a biblical text: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" This insistent question appears in many forms. "What is man, that thou takest knowledge of him!" "What is man, that he should be clean?" And again, "What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him?" The reiteration of a question, its rephrasing in many forms are always good evidence that the issue involved is both vital and difficult.

If man is an independent and rational being with a high degree of personal responsibility and an eternal destiny, one type of education will be appropriate. On
the other hand, if he is only a biological mechanism, with a set of conditioned reflexes, making virtually standard responses to defined stimuli; if he has a low degree of responsibility, and his activities are primarily a product of his environment, then a wholly different kind of education should be provided.

The importance of really grappling with this basic question is concealed by the fact that much of the subject matter taught him is the same, whatever answer is given. The elemental tools—language and numbers—are requisite in either case; some understanding of environment, either controlling or controlled, is an obvious necessity. These overlapping areas seem so substantial that it is easy to confuse the issue by underestimating the differences—yet the contrasts are vital. There will be differences in the matter studied, and even more significant divergences in the manner of instruction and the objectives of teaching.

There can be no doubt that recently the predominant answer to our fundamental question has been that man is a biological mechanism. Yet a relatively brief time ago the answer would have been overwhelmingly that man is the son of God. These contrasting views, in other words, roughly correspond to different periods in our history. They account for sharply different educational emphases.
The change in outlook upon man is reflected in our literature. Walt Whitman, for example, represented man as the absolute and the ultimate: “The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly to one single individual—namely to You.” “In the faces of men and women I see God.” “None has begun to think how divine he himself is.” This view of man made Whitman an ardent exponent of democracy. He was forced by his premise to conclude: “Liberty is to be subserved whatever occurs.” With him, as with Professor Arthur Murphy in his recent book, *The Uses of Reason*, “Freedom is not a political convenience, but a spiritual necessity.”

Whitman did not sing in those accents because he was a smug bourgeois; his point of view cannot be explained by asserting that he was one of the over-privileged or because he had security. The facts of his life make such explanations absurd. His outlook was a reflection of a profound conviction regarding human nature and destiny.

Come, now, to recent literature; contrast Whitman’s view of man with Erskine Caldwell’s portrait of Jeeter Lester in his play *Tobacco Road*, which has run for so many years on Broadway. Jeeter Lester was not much worse off economically than Whitman, but he yielded to his environment instead of seeking to alter it. He did
not lift his eyes unto the hills whence cometh our help; in fact he would not even understand the allusion. He knew nothing of the songs of the shepherd boy of old that are recorded in the Psalms.

The difference in the outlook upon man as portrayed by Whitman and as depicted by Caldwell is not so much a difference in social standing or economic position or political privilege or security of any kind. The difference is in the moral structure of the individual’s universe. Archibald MacLeish referred to that lost age of faith in man of which Whitman is an example in one of his poems:

"America was promises—to whom?

... The promises were Man’s: the land was his—
Man endowed by his Creator:
Earnest in love: perfectible by reason:
Just and perceiving justice: his natural nature
Clear and sweet at the source as springs in trees are.
It was Man the promise contemplated."

The modern outlook, on the whole, contrasts sharply with that of Whitman. Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, Eugene O’Neil’s *Desire under the Elms*, and dozens of others, reveal the drift. We can observe the fashionable charac-
terization of man in the work of Theodore Dreiser, who said: “Among the forces which sweep and play through the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind.” He is a plaything of forces vaster than he, a pitiable figure impotent before circumstance.

That expresses the dominant view of the last two decades. Is it any wonder that democracy was put on the defensive? Whitman may have been brash, but he recognized the courage, faith, and sense of power resident in the individual which demand liberty and invite a humane tradition. On the other hand, the helplessness of the modern, deprived of will and of responsibility, evokes pity and stimulates a humanitarian, as distinguished from humane, treatment. This trend has been summed up in the remark that if Harry Hopkins had not been born, it would have been necessary to invent him.

It is of this “modern” dependent kind of men that MacLeish wrote in The Irresponsibles: “Great numbers of men in various parts of the world wish passionately and even violently to give up the long labor of liberty and to surrender their wills and their bodies and even their minds to the will of a leader.” It is part of the record of modern times that one people after another have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage. They are discouraged not only with their destiny, but also with themselves.
If it is accurate to picture the human race as a great aggregation of robots, it is inevitable that well-being should seem more vital for them than liberty. A mechanical device must have oil before all else; mechanistic “men and women cannot be really free until they have plenty to eat.” To them it will no longer be said, “Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life.” Instead they will be told, “Turn early thy thoughts to training; with all thy getting, get a skill which a community survey has shown to be valuable in the marketplace.” The older teaching read, “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding.” A robot cannot achieve those qualities; he can only do what he has done before; therefore the modern version will be, “Happy is the man that findeth a job and getteth security.” The ancient question, “What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him?” receives a new answer, “Man is a machine, and we must adjust him.”

Adjusted people will never understand the war. They can fight it, of course; but they cannot interpret it. Of them it will be said that their primary thought, as they hurl back the Japanese, is “Will I have a job when I get home?” Indeed a very distinguished traveller returned with just that report of the principal concern of the boys battling in the jungles. One wonders whether it really
reflects the minds of the men in the armed forces as much as the preconceptions of the reporter.

Such a view of life makes war both more hideous and more futile. War destroys human life, displaces human beings, impairs values, obliterates the cultural heritage of art and architecture. The only recompense for so dreadful a catastrophe would be a new birth of freedom, a new sense of dignity for mankind, a new faith in the democratic principle. But for those who look upon man from the mechanistic and materialistic point of view, the recompense is to be found, not in freedom for, but in freedom from, or, forsooth, in a quart of milk. That kind of thinking leads E. H. Carr in his influential *Conditions of Peace* to suggest that now we must “correct the one-sided nineteenth century emphasis on liberty.”

It is not an accident of politics that this war is being fought without any great objectives of a positive kind, with no expression of insight into its essential tragedy by any of our leaders. After so much emphasis upon the ill-clothed, ill-housed, ill-fed, it is hard to talk of spiritual goals, of cultural objectives, of courage and faith. No wonder we hear more of monetary systems, a TVA on the Danube, schemes for physical welfare, and cynicism about self-government.

The deterioration in the position of mankind from
Walt Whitman to Theodore Dreiser, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Erskine Caldwell, from Tom Paine to Henry Wallace was stimulated by false and confused inferences from science. The wonders of science were so great that its authority ran beyond its scope. Men gained the impression that the scientific interpretation was the complete one, instead of a segmental, a partial, and often a very minor explanation. That certainly is true when men turn to science for the answer to this basic question, "What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him?" That is something science will never do.

A noted psychologist writing on personality said, "As a rule, science regards the individual as a mere bothersome accident." Scientific impersonality in dealing with man has a legitimate and proper scope; that scope, however, has been illegitimately and improperly extended to treat him not partly as a mechanism, but wholly as a mechanism. The new temper treats him for all purposes as a "bothersome accident." Man should be studied scientifically; that is a vital enterprise, and must be pursued with unflagging energy. He must also be studied humanely, and that is even more vital. One aspect of study deals primarily with matter, the other essentially with meaning. To neglect meaning is to make nonsense even of the scientific studies. Why bother so much about a car when a
new model is born every instant? Only for the beauty of the technics?

Because of the overweening authority of scientific techniques, the humane approach has been overlaid and hidden, whereas the scientific approach has been overexploited to the point of misconception. This inadequate view of man has had a profound influence upon educational practice. When the body is regarded as a mechanism and character as a bundle of disparate habits, then learning is reduced to stimulus and response. Under those circumstances there will not be the same respect for the student or the same method of instruction that would be employed in dealing with an integrated personality of ineffable significance and permanent value. The same subject matter will be differently interpreted.

With this modern view of man, is it any wonder that teachers of the Humanities no longer taught our youth "that the firmament sheweth the handiwork of God and that there is a benignity among the stars and a peace dropping therefrom like the gentle dew of evening. How could we, when the all-powerful and instrumental facts proved otherwise—namely, that they themselves were nothing but a speck of dust on a senseless wandering planet, a piece of dying protoplasm on the way out, and brief and powerless is their life?"
The mechanistic emphasis which has dominated public education and much secular training opens the way for the extreme behaviorists with their talk of reflex pathways, conditioned responses, and conduct determined by habits inflexibly bound to environmental stimuli. Sociology can explain the kind of man who is controlled by his environment, whereas a more profound view of human nature and the significance of life and personality would defy such superficial contentions.

In modern public education neither the love of man nor the love of God appears. Current educational literature, so-called, emphasizes that man is to be "understood," "co-operated with," "planned for," "correlated," "integrated"; but love seems to be irrelevant, though an earlier teaching said that "love never faileth." God is replaced by sociological data—in place of the love of God we have social responsibility! The whole of education becomes applied sociology of a peculiarly superficial and banal kind.

In line with this development, modern education has abandoned moral precepts pretty largely. Irresponsibility destroys the basis for ethics. It is natural enough that in a recent volume on education by the Faculty of Education of a great university a first rubric on health is "to face the problem of venereal disease honestly, realisti-
ally, and objectively.” Chastity as a means to the mitigation of the problem escapes the notice of the learned authors. Moral discrimination is not once referred to, nor an innate sense of personal dignity, nor yet a happy marital relation. The advice of these modern teachers is different from that of The Book of Proverbs; they say, “get wise,” instead of “gain wisdom.”

When the individual is regarded in this limited way, education sinks to training in a large number of specific habits. How large a number depends on time and circumstance, but their specificity is their essential quality. Education as a broadly conceived process is thus destroyed; everything is reduced to the level of training. Indeed the poverty-stricken view of man accounts for one of the great battles of our time—the prolonged argument over the formal discipline, the enormous literature about transfer of training, the disagreement about whether a person can learn one thing by learning another. The real answer is very simple. A man can; a robot cannot. Only a generation which had lost faith in the essential characteristics of manhood could be confused over so simple an issue.

It has been well said that “any law of learning is at the same time a law of the development of personality.” But it is just as true, and for our purposes much more reveal-
ing, to say that any concept of personality determines the law of learning. If the liberal arts have been ineffective in our generation and if the humanities have been sterile, it is because we started with the wrong answer, with a pseudo-scientific, a limited, a partial answer to the question, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?"

Obviously premises influence conclusions. If you believe that life is merely a bundle of specifics, then capacity to deal broadly with great questions becomes incredible. If, on the other hand, you take a more sensible, a more humane, a more broadly conceived view of life, you will answer the question, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" with the simple and lucid explanation to be found in the scripture itself, "Ye are gods; and . . . children of the most High." Education for such men will not be training in separate, specific habits, but an effort in integration. It will seek to cultivate the power of generalization, it will build its hopes upon the achievement of a magnificent ideal. It will not countenance neglect of ethical concepts or moral precepts.

The task of education in America is to rehumanize it. War creates a difficult environment since it is both inhuman and inhumane. Its brutality is heightened because stupid men think the only way people can win is to
stimulate them to hate and anger, knowing nothing of righteous wrath. Having discounted experience, they hesitate to speak of vindicating a great ideal or preserving a great tradition. At best there is a heavy accent upon the cheapness of human life and its expendable characteristics; in the heat of war casualties are recorded as a statistic rather than a vast human tragedy. Inevitably men are regimented and subjected to discipline from the outside, to order and command. The whole environment is hostile to the humanistic concept of the infinite value of the individual. If education simply follows that trend, it abdicates its function.

The post-war planners talk *ad nauseam* about how we are to restore our markets, how we are to regain our possessions, how we are to rebuild our cities, but there has been painfully little about recovering a sense of the infinite worth of man, or catching a glimmer of his divine characteristics. The war came upon us not primarily because we were physically unprepared, but because we were spiritually inert. Peace will not be within our walls and prosperity within our palaces unless we give primary concern to virtue and only secondary concern to the manipulative skills. More than all else, education must defy current trends and insist upon the richness of personality. Fighting *against* whatever is ephemeral *for* that which is eternal, it must emphasize aims and values.