

to the poison. It is as a poison-lover that he persecutes and kills the seers who tell him how to make himself whole; and it is as one who nostalgically yearns for vision that he despises the potential seer who forfeits his vision by wrong activity and the pursuit of power.

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Knowledge is acquired when we succeed in fitting a new experience into the system of concepts based upon our old experiences. Understanding comes when we liberate ourselves from the old and so make possible a direct, unmediated contact with the new, the mystery, moment by moment, of our existence.

The new is given on every level of experience—given perceptions, given emotions and thoughts, given states of unobstructed awareness, given relationships with things and persons. The old is our homemade system of ideas and word patterns. It is the stock of finished articles fabricated out of the given mystery by memory and analytical reasoning, by habit and the automatic associations of accepted notions. Knowledge is primarily a knowledge of these finished articles. Understanding is primarily direct awareness of the raw material.

Knowledge is always in terms of concepts and can be passed on by means of words or other symbols. Understanding is not conceptual, and therefore cannot be passed on. It is an immediate experience, and immediate experience can only be talked about (very

inadequately), never shared. Nobody can actually feel another's pain or grief, another's love or joy or hunger. And similarly nobody can experience another's understanding of a given event or situation. There can, of course, be knowledge of such an understanding, and this knowledge may be passed on in speech or writings, or by means of other symbols. Such communicable knowledge is useful as a reminder that there have been specific understandings in the past, and that understanding is at all times possible. But we must always remember that knowledge of understanding is not the same thing as the understanding, which is the raw material of that knowledge. It is as different from understanding as the doctor's prescription for penicillin is different from penicillin.

Understanding is not inherited, nor can it be laboriously acquired. It is something which, when circumstances are favorable, comes to us, so to say, of its own accord. All of us are knowers, all the time; it is only occasionally and in spite of ourselves that we understand the mystery of given reality. Consequently we are very seldom tempted to equate understanding with knowledge. Of the exceptional men and women, who have understanding in every situation, most are intelligent enough to see that understanding is different from knowledge and that conceptual systems based upon past experience are as necessary to the conduct of life as are spontaneous insights into new experiences. For these reasons the mistake of identifying understanding with knowledge is

rarely perpetuated and therefore poses no serious problem.

How different is the case with the opposite mistake, the mistake of supposing that knowledge is the same as understanding and interchangeable with it! All adults possess vast stocks of knowledge. Some of it is correct knowledge, some of it is incorrect knowledge, and some of it only looks like knowledge and is neither correct nor incorrect; it is merely meaningless. That which gives meaning to a proposition is not (to use the words of an eminent contemporary philosopher, Rudolf Carnap) "the attendant images or thoughts, but the possibility of deducing from it perceptive propositions, in other words the possibility of verification. To give sense to a proposition, the presence of images is not sufficient, it is not even necessary. We have no image of the electromagnetic field, nor even, I should say, of the gravitational field; nevertheless the propositions which physicists assert about these fields have a perfect sense because perceptive propositions are deducible from them." Metaphysical doctrines are propositions which cannot be operationally verified, at least on the level of ordinary experience. They may be expressive of a state of mind, in the way that lyrical poetry is expressive; but they have no assignable meaning. The information they convey is only pseudoknowledge. But the formulators of metaphysical doctrines and the believers in such doctrines have always mistaken this pseudoknowledge for knowledge and have

proceeded to modify their behavior accordingly. Meaningless pseudoknowledge has at all times been one of the principal motivators of individual and collective action. And that is one of the reasons why the course of human history has been so tragic and at the same time so strangely grotesque. Action based upon meaningless pseudoknowledge is always inappropriate, always beside the point, and consequently always results in the kind of mess mankind has always lived in—the kind of mess that makes the angels weep and the satirists laugh aloud.

Correct or incorrect, relevant or meaningless, knowledge and pseudoknowledge are as common as dirt and are therefore taken for granted. Understanding, on the contrary, is as rare, very nearly, as emeralds, and so is highly prized. The knowers would dearly love to be understood; but either their stock of knowledge does not include the knowledge of what to do in order to be understood; or else they know theoretically what they ought to do, but go on doing the opposite all the same. In either case they cherish the comforting delusion that knowledge and, above all, pseudoknowledge are understanding. Along with the closely related errors of over-abstracting, over-generalization, and over-simplification, this is the commonest of all intellectual sins and the most dangerous.

Of the vast sum of human misery about one-third, I would guess, is unavoidable misery. This is the price we must pay for being embodied, and for inheriting genes which are subject to deleterious mutations. This is the

rent extorted by Nature for the privilege of living on the surface of a planet, whose soil is mostly poor, whose climates are capricious and inclement, and whose inhabitants include a countless number of microorganisms capable of causing in man himself, in his domestic animals and cultivated plants, an immense variety of deadly or debilitating diseases. To these miseries of cosmic origin must be added the much larger group of those avoidable disasters we bring upon ourselves. For at least two thirds of our miseries spring from human stupidity, human malice, and those great motivators and justifiers of malice and stupidity, idealism, dogmatism, and proselytizing zeal on behalf of religious or political idols. But zeal, dogmatism, and idealism exist only because we are forever committing intellectual sins. We sin by attributing concrete significance to meaningless pseudoknowledge; we sin in being too lazy to think in terms of multiple causation and indulging instead in over-simplification, over-generalization, and over-abstracting; and we sin by cherishing the false but agreeable notion that conceptual knowledge and, above all, conceptual pseudoknowledge are the same as understanding.

Consider a few obvious examples. The atrocities of organized religion (and organized religion, let us never forget, has done about as much harm as it has done good) are all due, in the last analysis, to "mistaking the pointing finger for the moon"—in other words to mistaking the verbalized notion for the given mystery to which it refers or, more often, only seems to refer. This, as I have

said, is one of the original sins of the intellect, and it is a sin in which, with a rationalistic bumptiousness as grotesque as it is distasteful, theologians have systematically wallowed. From indulgence in this kind of delinquency there has arisen, in most of the great religious traditions of the world, a fantastic over-valuation of words. Over-valuation of words leads all too frequently to the fabrication and idolatrous worship of dogmas, to the insistence on uniformity of belief, the demand for assent by all and sundry to a set of propositions which, though meaningless, are to be regarded as sacred. Those who do not consent to this idolatrous worship of words are to be "converted" and, if that should prove impossible, either persecuted or, if the dogmatizers lack political power, ostracized and denounced. Immediate experience of reality unites men. Conceptualized beliefs, including even the belief in a God of love and righteousness, divides them and, as the dismal record of religious history bears witness, sets them for centuries on end at each other's throats.

Over-simplification, over-generalization, and over-abstraction are three other sins closely related to the sin of imagining that knowledge and pseudoknowledge are the same as understanding. The over-generalizing oversimplifier is the man who asserts, without producing evidence, that "All X's are Y," or, "All A's have a single cause, which is B." The over-abstracter is the one who cannot be bothered to deal with Jones and Smith, with Jane and Mary, as individuals, but enjoys being eloquent on the subject of Humanity, of Progress, of God and History

and the Future. This brand of intellectual delinquency is indulged in by every demagogue, every crusader. In the Middle Ages the favorite over-generalization was "All infidels are damned." (For the Moslems, "all infidels" meant "all Christians"; for the Christians, "all Moslems.") Almost as popular was the nonsensical proposition: "All heretics are inspired by the devil" and "All eccentric old women are witches." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the wars and persecutions were justified by the luminously clear and simple belief that "All Roman Catholics (or if you happened to be on the Pope's side, all Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans) are God's enemies." In our own day Hitler proclaimed that all the ills of the world had one cause, namely Jews, and that all Jews were subhuman enemies of mankind. For the communists, all the ills of the world have one cause, namely capitalists, and all capitalists and their middle-class supporters are subhuman enemies of mankind. It is perfectly obvious, on the face of it, that none of these over-generalized statements can possibly be true. But the urge to intellectual sin is fearfully strong. All are subject to temptation and few are able to resist.

There are in the lives of human beings very many situations in which only knowledge, conceptualized, accumulated, and passed on by means of words, is of any practical use. For example, if I want to manufacture sulphuric acid or to keep accounts for a banker, I do not start at the beginnings of chemistry or economics; I start at what is now

the end of these sciences. In other words, I go to a school where the relevant knowledge is taught, I read books in which the accumulation of past experience in these particular fields are set forth. I can learn the functions of an accountant or a chemical engineer on the basis of knowledge alone. For this particular purpose it is not necessary for me to have much understanding of concrete situations as they arise, moment by moment from the depths of the given mystery of our existence. What is important for me as a professional man is that I should be familiar with all the conceptual knowledge in my field. Ours is an industrial civilization, in which no society can prosper unless it possesses an elite of highly trained scientists and a considerable army of engineers and technicians. The possession and wide dissemination of a great deal of correct, specialized knowledge has become a prime condition of national survival. In the United States, during the last twenty or thirty years, this fact seems to have been forgotten. Professional educationists have taken John Dewey's theories of "learning through doing" and of "education as life-adjustment," and have applied them in such a way that, in many American schools, there is now doing without learning, along with courses in adjustment to everything except the basic twentieth-century fact that we live in a world where ignorance of science and its methods is the surest, shortest road to national disaster. During the past half century every other nation has made great efforts to impart more knowledge to more young people. In the United States professional educationists have chosen the

opposite course. At the turn of the century 56 percent of the pupils in American high schools studied algebra; today less than a quarter of them are so much as introduced to the subject. In 1955, 11 percent of American boys and girls were studying geometry; fifty years ago the figure was 27 percent. Four percent of them now take physics, as against 19 percent in 1900. Fifty percent of American high schools offer no courses in chemistry, 53 percent no courses in physics. This headlong decline in knowledge has not been accompanied by any increases in understanding; for it goes without saying that high school courses in life adjustment do not teach understanding. They teach only conformity to current conventions of personal and collective behavior. There is no substitute for correct knowledge, and in the process of acquiring correct knowledge there is no substitute for concentration and prolonged practice. Except for the unusually gifted, learning, by whatever method, must always be hard work. Unfortunately there are many professional educationists who seem to think that children should never be required to work hard. Wherever educational methods are based on this assumption, children will not in fact acquire much knowledge; and if the methods are followed for a generation or two, the society which tolerates them will find itself in full decline.

In theory, deficiencies in knowledge can be made good simply by changing the curriculum. In practice a change in the curriculum will do little good, unless there is a corresponding change in the point of view of

professional educationists. For the trouble with American educationists, writes a distinguished member of their profession, Dr. H. L. Dodge, is that they "regard any subject from personal grooming to philosophy as equally important or interchangeable in furthering the process of self-realization. This anarchy of values has led to the displacement of the established disciplines of science and the humanities by these new subjects." Whether professional educationists can be induced to change their current attitudes is uncertain. Should it prove impossible, we must fall back on the comforting thought that time never stands still and that nobody is immortal. What persuasion and the threat of national decline fail to accomplish, retirement, high blood pressure, and death will bring to pass, more slowly, it is true, but much more surely.

The dissemination of correct knowledge is one of the essential functions of education, and we neglect it at our peril. But, obviously, education should be more than a device for passing on correct knowledge. It should also teach what Dewey called life adjustment and self-realization. But precisely how should self-realization and life adjustment be promoted? To this question modern educators have given many answers. Most of these answers belong to one or the other of two main educational families, the Progressive and the Classical. Answers of the Progressive type find expression in the provision of courses in such subjects as "family living, consumer economics, job information, physical and mental health, training for world citizenship and statesmanship, and last, and we are afraid least"

(I quote again the words of Dr. Dodge) "training in fundamentals." Where answers of the classical type are preferred, educators provide courses in Latin, Greek, modern European literature, in world history, and in philosophy—exclusively, for some odd reason, of the Western brand. Shakespeare and Chaucer, Virgil and Homer—how far away they seem, how irrevocably dead! Why, then, should we bother to teach the classics? The reasons have been stated a thousand times, but seldom with more force and lucidity than by Albert Jay Nock in his *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*. "The literatures of Greece and Rome provide the longest, the most complete and most nearly continuous record we have of what the strange creature *Homo Sapiens* has been busy about in virtually every department of spiritual, intellectual and social activity. Hence the mind that has canvassed this record is much more than a disciplined mind; it is an experienced mind. It has come, as Emerson says, into a feeling of immense longevity, and it instinctively views contemporary man and his doings in the perspective set by this profound and weighty experience. Our studies were properly called formative, because, beyond all others, their effect was powerfully maturing. Cicero told the unvarnished truth in saying that those who have no knowledge of what has gone before them must for ever remain children. And if one wished to characterize the collective mind of this period, or indeed of any period, the use it makes of its powers of observation, reflection, logical inference, one would best do it by the word *immaturity*."

The Progressive and the Classical approaches to ed-

ucation are not incompatible. It is perfectly possible to combine a schooling in the local cultural tradition with a training, half vocational, half psychological, in adaptation to the current conventions of social life, and then to combine this combination with training in the sciences, in other words with the inculcation of correct knowledge. But is this enough? Can such an education result in the self-realization which is its aim? The question deserves our closest scrutiny. Nobody, of course, can doubt the importance of accumulated experience as a guide for individual and social conduct. We are human because, at a very early stage in the history of the species, our ancestors discovered a way of preserving and disseminating the results of experience. They learned to speak and were thus enabled to translate what they had perceived, what they had inferred from given fact and home-grown fantasy, into a set of concepts, which could be added to by each generation and bequeathed, a treasure of mingled sense and nonsense, to posterity. In Mr. Nock's words "the mind that has canvassed this record is an experienced mind." The only trouble, so far as *we* are concerned, is that the vicarious experience derived from a study of the classics is, in certain respects, completely irrelevant to twentieth-century facts. In many ways, of course, the modern world resembles the world inhabited by the men of antiquity. In many other ways, however, it is radically different. For example, in *their* world the rate of change was exceedingly slow; in *ours* advancing technology produces a state of chronic revolution. *They*

took infanticide for granted (Thebes was the only Greek city which forbade the exposure of babies) and regarded slavery as not only necessary to the Greek way of life, but as intrinsically natural and right; *we* are the heirs of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century humanitarianism and must solve *our* economic and demographic problems by methods less dreadfully reminiscent of recent totalitarian practice. Because all the dirty work was done by slaves, *they* regarded every form of manual activity as essentially unworthy of a gentleman and in consequence never subjected their over-abstract, over-rational theories to the test of experiment; *we* have learned, or at least are learning, to think operationally. *They* despised "barbarians," never bothered to learn a foreign language, and could therefore naively regard the rules of Greek grammar and syntax as the Laws of Thought; *we* have begun to understand the nature of language, the danger of taking words too seriously, the ever present need for linguistic analysis. *They* knew nothing about the past and therefore, in Cicero's words, were like children. (Thucydides, the greatest historian of antiquity, prefaces his account of the Peloponnesian War by airily asserting that nothing of great importance had happened before his own time.) *We*, in the course of the last five generations, have acquired a knowledge of man's past extending back to more than half a million years and covering the activities of tribes and nations in every continent. *They* developed political institutions which, in the case of Greece, were hopelessly unstable and, in the case of Rome, were only

too firmly fixed in a pattern of aggressiveness and brutality; but what *we* need is a few hints on the art of creating an entirely new kind of society, durable but adventurous, strong but humane, highly organized but liberty-loving, elastic, and adaptable. In this matter Greece and Rome can teach us only negatively—by demonstrating, in their divergent ways, what *not* to do.

From all this it is clear that a classical education in the humanities of two thousand years ago requires to be supplemented by some kind of training in the humanities of today and tomorrow. The Progressives profess to give such a training; but surely we need something a little more informative, a little more useful in this vertiginously changing world of ours, than courses in present-day consumer economics and current job information. But even if a completely adequate schooling in the humanities of the past, the present, and the foreseeable future could be devised and made available to all, would the aims of education, as distinct from factual and theoretical instruction, be thereby achieved? Would the recipients of such an education be any nearer to the goal of self-realization? The answer, I am afraid, is, No. For at this point we find ourselves confronted by one of those paradoxes, which are of the very essence of our strange existence as amphibians inhabiting, without being completely at home in, half a dozen almost incommensurable worlds—the world of concepts and the world of data, the objective world and the subjective, the world of personal

consciousness and the world of the unconscious. Where education is concerned, the paradox may be expressed in the statement that the medium of education, which is language, is absolutely necessary, but also fatal; the subject matter of education, which is the conceptualized accumulation of past experience, is indispensable, but also an obstacle to be circumvented. "Existence is prior to essence." Unlike most metaphysical propositions, this slogan of the existentialists can actually be verified. "Wolf children," adopted by animal mothers and brought up in animal surroundings, have the form of human beings, but are not human. The essence of humanity, it is evident, is not something we are born with; it is something we make or grow into. We learn to speak, we accumulate conceptualized knowledge and pseudoknowledge, we imitate our elders, we build up fixed patterns of thought and feeling and behavior, and in the process we become human, we turn into persons. But the things which make us human are precisely the things which interfere with self-realization and prevent understanding. We are humanized by imitating others, by learning their speech, and by acquiring the accumulated knowledge which language makes available. But we understand only when, by liberating ourselves from the tyranny of words, conditioned reflexes, and social conventions, we establish direct, unmediated contact with experience. The greatest paradox of our existence consists in this: that, in order to understand, we must first encumber ourselves with all the intellectual and emotional baggage, which is an impediment

ment to understanding. Except in a dim, preconscious way, animals do not understand a situation, even though, by inherited instinct or by an *ad hoc* act of intelligence, they may be reacting to it with complete appropriateness, as though they understood it. Conscious understanding is the privilege of men and women, and it is a privilege which they have earned, strangely enough, by acquiring the useful or delinquent habits, the stereotypes of perception, thought, and feeling, the rituals of behavior, the stock of second-hand knowledge and pseudoknowledge, whose possession is the greatest obstacle to understanding. "Learning," says Lao-tzu, "consists in adding to one's stock day by day. The practice of the Tao consists in subtracting." This does not mean, of course, that we can live by subtraction alone. Learning is as necessary as unlearning. Wherever technical proficiency is needed, learning is indispensable. From youth to old age, from generation to generation, we must go on adding to our stock of useful and relevant knowledge. Only in this way can we hope to deal effectively with the physical environment, and with the abstract ideas which make it possible for men to find their way through the complexities of civilization and technology. But this is not the right way to deal with our personal reactions to ourselves or to other human beings. In such situations there must be an unlearning of accumulated concepts; we must respond to each new challenge not with our old conditioning, not in the light of conceptual knowledge based on the memory of past and different events, not by consulting the law of

averages, but with a consciousness stripped naked and as though new born. Once more we are confronted by the great paradox of human life. It is our conditioning which develops our consciousness; but in order to make full use of this developed consciousness, we must start by getting rid of the conditioning which developed it. By adding conceptual knowledge to conceptual knowledge, we make conscious understanding possible; but this potential understanding can be actualized only when we have subtracted all that we have added.

It is because we have memories that we are convinced of our self-identity as persons and as members of a given society.

The child is father of the Man;

And I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety.

What Wordsworth called "natural piety" a teacher of understanding would describe as indulgence in emotionally charged memories, associated with childhood and youth. Factual memory—the memory, for example, of the best way of making sulphuric acid or of casting up accounts—is an unmixed blessing. But psychological memory (to use Krishnamurti's term), memory carrying an emotional charge, whether positive or negative, is a source at the worst of neurosis and insanity (psychiatry is largely the art of ridding patients of the incubus of their negatively charged memories), at the best of distractions from the

task of understanding—distractions which, though socially useful, are nonetheless obstacles to be climbed over or avoided. Emotionally charged memories cement the ties of family life (or sometimes make family life impossible) and serve, when conceptualized and taught as a cultural tradition, to hold communities together. On the level of understanding, on the level of charity, and on the level, to some extent, of artistic expression, an individual has it in his power to transcend his social tradition, to overstep the bounds of the culture in which he has been brought up. On the level of knowledge, manners, and custom, he can never get very far away from the *persona* created for him by his family and his society. The culture within which he lives is a prison—but a prison which makes it possible for any prisoner who so desires to achieve freedom, a prison to which, for this and a host of other reasons, its inmates owe an enormous debt of gratitude and loyalty. But though it is our duty to “honor our father and our mother,” it is also our duty “to hate our father and our mother, our brethren and our sisters, yea and our own life”—that socially conditioned life we take for granted. Though it is necessary for us to add to our cultural stock day by day, it is also necessary to subtract and subtract. There is, to quote the title of Simone Weil’s posthumous essay, a great “Need for Roots”; but there is an equally urgent need, on occasion, for total rootlessness.

In our present context this book by Simone Weil and the preface which Mr. T. S. Eliot contributes to the En-

glish edition are particularly instructive. Simone Weil was a woman of great ability, heroic virtue, and boundless spiritual aspiration. But unfortunately for herself, as well as for her readers, she was weighed down by a burden of knowledge and pseudoknowledge, which her own almost maniacal over-valuation of words and notions rendered intolerably heavy. A clerical friend reports of her that he did not “ever remember Simone Weil, in spite of her virtuous desire for objectivity, give way in the course of a discussion.” She was so deeply rooted in her culture that she came to believe that words were supremely important. Hence her love of argument and the obstinacy with which she clung to her opinions. Hence too her strange inability, on so many occasions, to distinguish the pointing finger from the indicated moon. “But why do you prate of God?” Meister Eckhart asked; and out of the depth of his understanding of given reality, he added, “Whatever you say of Him is untrue.” Necessarily so; for “the saving truth was never preached by the Buddha,” or by anyone else.

Truth can be defined in many ways. But if you define it as understanding (and this is how all the masters of the spiritual life have defined it), then it is clear that “Truth must be lived and there is nothing to argue about in this teaching; any arguing is sure to go against the intent of it.” This was something which Emerson knew and consistently acted upon. To the almost frenzied exasperation of that pugnacious manipulator of religious notions, the

elder Henry James, he refused to argue about anything. And the same was true of William Law. "Away, then, with the fictions and workings of discursive reason, either for or against Christianity! They are only the wanton spirit of the mind, whilst ignorant of God and insensible of its own nature and condition. . . . For neither God, nor heaven, nor hell, nor the devil, nor the flesh, can be any other way knowable in you or by you, but by their own existence and manifestation in you. And any pretended knowledge of any of those things, beyond and without this self-evident sensibility of their birth within you, is only such knowledge of them as the blind man hath of the light that has never entered into him." This does not mean, of course, that discursive reason and argument are without value. Where knowledge is concerned, they are not only valuable; they are indispensable. But knowledge is not the same thing as understanding. If we want to understand, we must uproot ourselves from our culture, bypass language, get rid of emotionally charged memories, hate our fathers and mothers, subtract and subtract from our stock of notions. "Needs must it be a virgin," writes Meister Eckhart, "by whom Jesus is received. Virgin, in other words, is a person, void of alien images, free as he was when he existed not."

Simone Weil must have known, theoretically, about this need for cultural virginity, of total rootlessness. But, alas, she was too deeply embedded in her own and other people's ideas, too superstitious a believer in the magic of the words she handled with so much skill, to be able to

act upon this knowledge. "The food," she wrote, "that a collectivity supplies to those who form part of it has no equivalent in the universe." (Thank God! we may add, after sniffing the spiritual nourishment provided by many of the vanished collectivities of the past.) Furthermore, the food provided by a collectivity is food "not only for the souls of the living, but also for souls yet unborn." Finally, "the collectivity constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead, the sole transmitting agency by means of which the dead can speak to the living. And the sole earthly reality which is connected with the eternal destiny of man is the irradiating light of those who have managed to become fully conscious of this destiny, transmitted from generation to generation."

This last sentence could only have been penned by one who systematically mistook knowledge for understanding, homemade concepts for given reality. It is, of course, desirable that there should be knowledge of what men now dead have said about their understanding of reality. But to maintain that a knowledge of other people's understanding is the same, for us, as understanding, or can even directly lead us to understanding, is a mistake against which all the masters of the spiritual life have always warned us. The letter in St. Paul's phrase, is full of "oldness." It has therefore no relevance to the ever novel reality, which can be understood only in the "newness of the spirit." As for the dead, let them bury their dead. For even the most exalted past seers and avatars "never taught

the saving truth." We should not, it goes without saying, neglect the records of dead men's understandings. On the contrary, we ought to know all about them. But we must know all about them without taking them too seriously. We must know all about them, while remaining acutely aware that such knowledge is not the same as understanding and that understanding will come to us only when we have subtracted what we know and made ourselves void and virgin, free as we were when we were not.

Turning from the body of the book to the preface, we find an even more striking example of that literally preposterous over-valuation of words and notions, to which the cultured and the learned are so fatally prone. "I do not know," Mr. Eliot writes, "whether she [Simone Weil] could read the Upanishads in Sanskrit—or, if so, how great was her mastery of what is not only a highly developed language, but a way of thought, the difficulties of which become more formidable to a European student the more diligently he applies himself to it." But like all the other great works of oriental philosophy, the Upanishads are not systems of pure speculation, in which the niceties of language are all important. They were written by Transcendental Pragmatists, as we may call them, whose concern was to teach a doctrine which could be made to "work," a metaphysical theory which could be operationally tested, not through perception only, but by a direct experience of the whole man on every level of his being. To understand the meaning of *Tat tvam asi*, "thou art That," it is not necessary to be a profound San-

skrit scholar. (Similarly, it is not necessary to be a proud Hebrew scholar in order to understand the meaning of "Thou shalt not kill.") Understanding of the doctrine (as opposed to conceptualized knowledge about the doctrine) will come only to those who choose to perform the operations that permit *Tat tvam asi* to become a given fact of direct, unmediated experience, or in Law's words "A self-evident sensibility of its birth within them." Did Simone Weil know Sanskrit, or didn't she? The question is entirely beside the point—is just a particularly smelly cultural red herring dragged across the trail that leads from selfhood to more-than-selfhood, from notionally conditioned ego or unconditioned spirit. In relation to the Upanishads or any other work of Hindu or Buddhist philosophy, only one question deserves to be taken with complete seriousness. It is this. How can a form of words, *Tat tvam asi*, a metaphysical proposition such as *Nirvana and samsara are one*, be converted into the direct, unmediated experience of a given fact? How can language and the learned foolery of scholars (for, in this vital context, that is all it is) be circumvented, so that the individual soul may finally understand the *That* which, in spite of all its efforts to deny the primordial fact, is identical with the *thou*? Specifically, should we follow the methods inculcated by Patanjali, or those of the Hinayana monks, those of the Tantrics of northern India and Tibet, those of the Far Eastern Taoists or the followers of Zen, those described by St. John of the Cross and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*? If the European student wishes to

remain shut up in the prison of his private cravings and the thought-patterns inherited from his predecessors; then by all means let him plunge through Sanskrit, or Pali, or Chinese, or Tibetan, into the verbal study of "a way of thought, the difficulties of which become more formidable the more diligently he applies himself to it." If, on the other hand, he wishes to transcend himself by actually understanding the primordial fact described or hinted at in the Upanishads and the other scriptures of what, for lack of a better phrase, we will call "spiritual religion," then he must ignore the problems of language and speculative philosophy, or at least relegate them to a secondary position, and concentrate his attention on the practical means whereby the advance from knowledge to understanding may best be made.

From the positively charged collective memories, which are organized into a cultural or religious tradition, let us now return to the positively charged private memories, which individuals organize into a system of "natural piety." We have no more right to wallow in natural piety—that is to say, in emotionally charged memories of past happiness and vanished loves—than to bemoan earlier miseries and torment ourselves with remorse for old offenses. And we have no more right to waste the present instant in relishing future and entirely hypothetical pleasures than to waste it in the apprehension of possible disasters to come. "There is no greater pain," says Dante, "than, in misery, to remember happy times." "Then stop

remembering happy times and accept the fact of your present misery," would be the seemingly unsympathetic answer of all those who have had understanding. The emptying of memory is classed by St. John of the Cross as a good second only to the state of union with God, and an indispensable condition of such union.

The word *Buddha* may be translated as "awakened." Those who merely know about things, or only think they know, live in a state of self-conditioned and culturally conditional somnambulism. Those who understand given reality as it presents itself, moment by moment, are wide awake. Memory charged with pleasant emotions is a soporific or, more accurately, an inducer of trance. This was discovered empirically by an American hypnotist, Dr. W. B. Fahnestock, whose book *Statismolism, or Artificial Somnambulism*, was published in 1871. "When persons are desirous of entering into this state [of artificial somnambulism], I place them in a chair, where they may be at perfect ease. They are next instructed to throw their minds to some familiar place—it matters not where, so that they have been there before and seem desirous of going there again, even in thought. When they have thrown the mind to the place, or upon the desired object, I endeavor by speaking to them frequently to keep their mind upon it. . . . This must be persisted in for some time." In the end, "clairvoyancy will be induced." Anyone who has experimented with hypnosis, or who has watched an experienced operator inducing trance in a difficult subject, knows how effective Fahnestock's method can be.

Incidentally, the relaxing power of positively charged memory was rediscovered, in another medical context, by an oculist, Dr. W. H. Bates, who used to make his patients cover their eyes and revisit in memory the scenes of their happiest experiences. By this means muscular and mental tensions were reduced and it became possible for the patients to use their eyes and minds in a relaxed and therefore efficient way. From all this it is clear that, while positively charged memories can and should be used for specific therapeutic purposes, there must be no indiscriminate indulgence in "natural piety"; for such indulgence may result in a condition akin to trance—a condition at the opposite pole from the wakefulness that is understanding. Those who live with unpleasant memories become neurotic and those who live with pleasant ones become somnambulist. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof—and the good thereof.

The Muses, in Greek mythology, were the daughters of Memory, and every writer is embarked, like Marcel Proust, on a hopeless search for time lost. But a good writer is one who knows how to "*donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*." Thanks to this purer sense, his readers will react to his words with a degree of understanding much greater than they would have had, if they had reacted, in their ordinary self-conditioned or culture-conditioned way, to the events to which the words refer. A great poet must do too much remembering to be more than a sporadic understander; but he knows how to express himself in words which cause other people

to understand. Time lost can never be regained; but in his search for it, he may reveal to his readers glimpses of timeless reality.

Unlike the poet, the mystic is "a son of time present." "Past and present veil God from our sight," says Jalaluddin Rumi, who was a Sufi first and only secondarily a great poet. "Burn up both of them with fire. How long will you let yourself be partitioned by these segments like a reed? So long as it remains partitioned, a reed is not privy to secrets, neither is it vocal in response to lips or breathing." Along with its mirror image in anticipation, emotionally charged memory is a barrier that shuts us out from understanding.

Natural piety can very easily be transformed into artificial piety; for some emotionally charged memories are common to all the members of a given society and lend themselves to being organized into religious, political, or cultural traditions. These traditions are systematically drummed into the young of each successive generation and play an important part in the long drama of their conditioning for citizenship. Since the memories common to one group are different from the memories shared by other groups, the social solidarity created by tradition is always partial and exclusive. There is natural and artificial piety in relation to everything belonging to us, coupled with suspicion, dislike, and contempt in relation to everything belonging to them.

Artificial piety may be fabricated, organized, and fostered in two ways—by the repetition of verbal formulas

of belief and worship, and by the performance of symbolic acts and rituals. As might be expected, the second is the more effective method. What is the easiest way for a skeptic to achieve faith? The question was answered three hundred years ago by Pascal. The unbeliever must act "as though he believed, take holy water, have masses said, etc. This will naturally cause you to believe and will besot you." (*Cela vous abêtira*—literally, will make you stupid.) We have to be made stupid, insists Professor Jacques Chevalier, defending his hero against the critics who have been shocked by Pascal's blunt language: we have to stultify our intelligence, because "intellectual pride deprives us of God and debases us to the level of animals." Which is, of course, perfectly true. But it does not follow from this truth that we ought to besot ourselves in the manner prescribed by Pascal and all the propagandists of all the religions. Intellectual pride can be cured only by devaluating pretentious words, only by getting rid of conceptualized pseudoknowledge and opening ourselves to reality. Artificial piety based on conditioned reflexes merely transfers intellectual pride from the bumptious individual to his even more bumptious church. At one remove, the pride remains intact. For the convinced believer, understanding or direct contact with reality is exceedingly difficult. Moreover the mere fact of having a strong reverential feeling about some hallowed thing, person, or proposition is no guarantee of the existence of the thing, the infallibility of the person, or the truth of the proposition. In this context, how instructive is

the account of an experiment undertaken by that most imaginative and versatile of the Eminent Victorians, Sir Francis Galton! The aim of the experiment, he writes in his Autobiography, was to "gain an insight into the abject feelings of barbarians and others concerning the power of images which they know to be of human handiwork. I wanted if possible to enter into these feelings. . . . It was difficult to find a suitable object for trial, because it ought to be in itself quite unfitted to arouse devout feelings. I fixed on a comic picture, it was that of Punch, and made believe in its possession of divine attributes. I addressed it with much quasi-reverence as possessing a mighty power to reward or punish the behavior of men towards it, and found little difficulty in ignoring the impossibilities of what I professed. The experiment succeeded. I began to feel and long retained for the picture a large share of the feelings that a barbarian entertains towards his idols, and learned to appreciate the enormous potency they might have over him."

The nature of a conditioned reflex is such that, when the bell rings, the dog salivates, when the much worshiped image is seen, or the much repeated credo, litany, or mantram is pronounced, the heart of the believer is filled with reverence and his mind with faith. And this happens, regardless of the content of the phrase repeated, the nature of the image to which obeisance has been made. He is not responding spontaneously to given reality; he is responding to some thing, or word, or gesture, which automatically brings into play a previously

installed post-hypnotic suggestion. Meister Eckhart, that acutest of religious psychologists, clearly recognized this fact. "He who fondly imagines to get more of God in thoughts, prayers, pious offices and so forth than by the fireside or in the stall, in sooth he does but take God, as it were, and swaddle His head in a cloak and hide Him under the table. For he who seeks God in settled forms lays hold of the form, while missing the God concealed in it. But he who seeks God in no special guise lays hold of Him as He is in Himself, and such as one lives with the Son and is the life itself."

"If you look for the Buddha, you will not see the Buddha." "If you deliberately try to become a Buddha, your Buddha is samsara." "If a person seeks the Tao, that person loses the Tao." "By intending to bring yourself into accord with Suchness, you instantly deviate." "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it." There is a Law of Reversed Effort. The harder we try with the conscious will to do something, the less we shall succeed. Proficiency and the results of proficiency come only to those who have learned the paradoxical art of simultaneously doing and not doing, of combining relaxation with activity, of letting go as a person in order that the immanent and transcendent Unknown Quantity may take hold. We cannot make ourselves understand; the most we can do is to foster a state of mind, in which understanding may come to us. What is this state? Clearly it is not any state of limited consciousness. Reality as it is given moment by moment cannot be understood by a mind acting in

obedience to post-hypnotic suggestion, or so conditioned by its emotionally charged memories that it responds to the living *now* as though it were the dead *then*. Nor is the mind that has been trained in concentration any better equipped to understand reality. For concentration is merely systematic exclusion, the shutting away from consciousness of all but one thought, one ideal, one image, or one negation of all thoughts, ideals, and images. But however true, however lofty, however holy, no thought or ideal or image can contain reality or lead to the understanding of reality. Nor can the negation of awareness result in that completer awareness necessary to understanding. At the best these things can lead only to a state of ecstatic dissociation, in which one particular aspect of reality, the so-called *spiritual* aspect, may be apprehended. If reality is to be understood in its fullness, as it is given moment by moment, there must be an awareness which is not limited, either deliberately by piety or concentration, or involuntarily by mere thoughtlessness and the force of habit. Understanding comes when we are totally aware—aware to the limits of our mental and physical potentialities. This, of course, is a very ancient doctrine. "Know thyself" is a piece of advice which is as old as civilization, and probably a great deal older. To follow that advice, a man must do more than indulge in introspection. If I would know myself, I must know my environment: for as a body, I am part of the environment, a natural object among other natural objects; and, as a mind, I consist to a great extent of my immediate reactions to

the environment and of my secondary reactions to those primary reactions. In practice "know thyself" is a call to total awareness. To those who practice it, what does total awareness reveal? It reveals, first of all, the limitations of the thing which each of us calls "I," and the enormity, the utter absurdity of its pretensions. "I am the master of my fate," poor Henley wrote at the end of a celebrated morsel of rhetoric, "I am the captain of my soul." Nothing could be further from the truth. My fate cannot be mastered; it can only be collaborated with and thereby, to some extent, directed. Nor am I the captain of my soul; I am only its noisiest passenger—a passenger who is not sufficiently important to sit at the captain's table and does not know, even by report, what the soul-ship looks like, how it works, or where it is going. Total awareness starts, in a word, with the realization of my ignorance and my impotence. How do electrochemical events in my brain turn into the perception of a quartet by Haydn or a thought, let us say, of Joan of Arc? I haven't the faintest idea—nor has anyone else. Or consider a seemingly much simpler problem. Can I lift my right hand? The answer is, No. I can't. I can only give the order; the actual lifting is done by somebody else. Who? I don't know. Why? I don't know. And when I have eaten, who digests the bread and cheese? When I have cut myself, who heals the wound? While I am sleeping, who restores the tired body to strength, the neurotic mind to sanity? All I can say is that "I" cannot do any of these things. The catalog of what I do not know and am incapable of achieving

could be lengthened almost indefinitely. Even my claim to think is only partially justified by the observable facts. Descartes's primal certainty, "I think, therefore I am," turns out, on closer examination, to be a most dubious proposition. In actual fact, is it *I* who does the thinking? Would it not be truer to say, "Thoughts come into existence, and sometimes I am aware of them"? Language, that treasure house of fossil observations and latent philosophy, suggests that this is in fact what happens. Whenever I find myself thinking more than ordinarily well, I am apt to say, "An idea has occurred to me," or "It came into my head," or, "I see it clearly." In each case the phrase implies that thoughts have their origin "out there," in something analogous, on the mental level, to the external world. Total awareness confirms the hints of idiomatic speech. In relation to the subjective "I," most of the mind is out there. My thoughts are a set of mental, but still external facts. I do not invent my best thoughts; I find them.

Total awareness, then, reveals the following facts: that I am profoundly ignorant, that I am impotent to the point of helplessness, and that the most valuable elements in my personality are unknown quantities existing "out there," as mental objects more or less completely independent of my control. This discovery may seem at first rather humiliating and even depressing. But if I wholeheartedly accept them, the facts become a source of peace, a reason for serenity and cheerfulness. I am ignorant and impo-

tent and yet, somehow or other, here I am—unhappy, no doubt, profoundly dissatisfied, but alive and kicking. In spite of everything, I survive, I get by, sometimes I even get on. From these two sets of facts—my survival on the one hand and my ignorance and impotence on the other—I can only infer that the not-I, which looks after my body and gives me my best ideas, must be amazingly intelligent, knowledgeable, and strong. As a self-centered ego, I do my best to interfere with the beneficent workings of this not-I. But in spite of my likes and dislikes, in spite of my malice, my infatuations, my gnawing anxieties, in spite of all my overvaluation of words, in spite of my self-stultifying insistence on living, not in present reality, but in memory and anticipation, this not-I, with whom I am associated, sustains me, preserves me, gives me a long succession of second chances. We know very little and can achieve very little; but we are at liberty, if we so choose, to cooperate with a greater power and a completer knowledge, an unknown quantity at once immanent and transcendent, at once physical and mental, at once subjective and objective. If we cooperate, we shall be all right, even if the worst should happen. If we refuse to cooperate, we shall be all wrong, even in the most propitious of circumstances.

These conclusions are only the first fruits of total awareness. Yet richer harvests are to follow. In my ignorance I am sure that I am eternally I. This conviction is rooted in emotionally charged memory. Only when, in the words of St. John of the Cross, the memory has been

emptied, can I escape from the sense of my watertight separateness and so prepare myself for the understanding, moment by moment, of reality on all its levels. But the memory cannot be emptied by an act of will, or by systematic discipline or by concentration—even by concentration on the idea of emptiness. It can be emptied only by total awareness. Thus, if I am aware of my distractions—which are mostly emotionally charged memories or fantasies based upon such memories—the mental whirligig will automatically come to a stop and the memory will be emptied, at least for a moment or two. Again, if I become totally aware of my envy, my resentment, my uncharitableness, these feelings will be replaced, during the time of my awareness, by a more realistic reaction to the events taking place around me. My awareness, of course, must be uncontaminated by approval or condemnation. Value judgments are conditioned, verbalized reactions to primary reactions. Total awareness is a primary, choiceless, impartial response to the present situation as a whole. There are in it no limiting conditioned reactions to the primary reaction, to the pure cognitive apprehension of the situation. If memories of verbal formulas of praise or blame should make their appearance in consciousness, they are to be examined impartially as any other datum is examined. Professional moralists have confidence in the surface will, believe in punishments and rewards, and are adrenalin addicts who like nothing better than a good orgy of righteous indignation. The masters of the spiritual life have little faith in the surface will or the utility,

for their particular purposes, of rewards or punishments, and do not indulge in righteous indignation. Experience has taught them that the highest good can never, in the very nature of things, be achieved by moralizing. "Judge not that ye be not judged" is their watchword and total awareness is their method.

Two or three thousand years behind the times; a few contemporary psychiatrists have now discovered this method. "Socrates," writes Professor Carl Rogers, "developed novel ideas, which have proven to be socially constructive." Why? Because he was "notably nondefensive and open to experience. The reasoning behind this is based primarily upon the discovery in psychotherapy that if we can add to the sensory and visceral experiencing, characteristic of the whole animal kingdom, the gist of a free undistorted awareness, of which only the human animal seems fully capable, we have an organism which is as aware of the demands of the culture as it is of its own physiological demands for food and sex, which is just as aware of its desire for friendly relationships as it is aware of its delicate and sensitive tenderness toward others as it is of its hostilities toward others. When man is less than fully man, when he denies to awareness various aspects of his experience, then indeed we have all too often reason to fear him and his behavior, as the present world situation testifies. But when he is most fully man, when he is his complete organism, when awareness of experience, that peculiarly human attribute, is fully operating, then

his behavior is to be trusted." Better late than never! It is comforting to find the immemorial commonplaces of mystical wisdom turning up as a brand new discovery in psychotherapy. *Gnosce teipsum*—know yourself. Know yourself in relation to your overt intentions and your hidden motives, in relation to your thinking, your physical functioning, and to those greater not-selves, who see to it that, despite all the ego's attempts at sabotage, the thinking shall be tolerably relevant and the functioning not too abnormal. Be totally aware of what you do and think and of persons, with whom you are in relationship, the events which prompt you at every moment of your existence. Be aware impartially, realistically, without judging, without reacting in terms of remembered words to your present cognitive reactions. If you do this, the memory will be emptied, knowledge and pseudoknowledge will be relegated to their proper place, and you will have understanding—in other words, you will be in direct contact with reality at every instant. Better still, you will discover what Carl Rogers calls your "delicate and sensitive tenderness towards others." And not only *your* tenderness, the cosmic tenderness, the fundamental all-rightness of the universe—in spite of death, in spite of suffering. "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." This is the utterance of someone who is totally aware. And another such utterance is, "God is love." From the standpoint of common sense, the first is the raving of a lunatic, the second flies in the face of all experience and is obviously

untrue. But common sense is not based on total awareness; it is a product of convention, or organized memories of other people's words, of personal experiences limited by passion and value judgments, of hallowed notions and naked self-interest. Total awareness opens the way to understanding, and when any given situation is understood, the nature of all reality is made manifest, and the nonsensical utterances of the mystics are seen to be true, or at least as nearly true as it is possible for a verbal expression of the ineffable to be. One in all and all in One; samasara and nirvana are the same; multiplicity is unity, and unity is not so much one as not-two; all things are void, and yet all things are the Dharma-Body of the Buddha—and so on. So far as conceptual knowledge is concerned, such phrases are completely meaningless. It is only when there is understanding that they make sense. For when there is understanding, there is an experienced fusion of the End with the Means, of the Wisdom, which is the timeless realization of Suchness, with the Compassion which is Wisdom in action. Of all the worn, smudged, dog-eared words in our vocabulary, "love" is surely the grubbiest, smelliest, slimiest. Bawled from a million pulpits, lasciviously crooned through hundreds of millions of loudspeakers, it has become an outrage to good taste and decent feeling, an obscenity which one hesitates to pronounce. And yet it has to be pronounced; for, after all, Love is the last word.

THE SIXTH PATRIARCH

In Dwight Goddard's extremely valuable compilation, *A Buddhist Bible*, there is one document of which I am specially fond—"The Sutra Spoken by the Sixth Patriarch." That blending of Mahayana Buddhism with Taoism, which the Chinese called Ch'an and the Japanese of a later period called Zen, achieves its earliest formulation in this account of Hui-neng and his teaching. And whereas most of the other Mahayana sutras are written in a somewhat forbidding philosophical style, these recorded reminiscences and sayings of the Sixth Patriarch exhibit a freshness and liveliness which make them quite delightful.

Hui-neng's first "conversion" took place while he was still a youth. "One day, while I was selling firewood in the market, I heard a man reading a Sutra. No sooner had I heard the text of the Sutra than my mind became all of a sudden enlightened." Traveling to the Tung-tsen monastery, he was received by the Fifth Patriarch who asked "whence I came and what I expected to get from him. I replied that I was a commoner from Sun-chow, and then said, 'I ask for nothing but Buddhahood.'"

The boy was then sent to the granary of the mon-