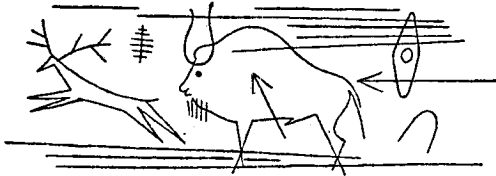

DOWN TO EARTH

by ALAN DEVOE



ANIMAL FAITH

THE most famous cautionary tale for would-be philosophers is perhaps the very old story about the centipede. This centipede, it will be recalled, had spent a happy lifetime pursuing the various activities of centipedehood, scurrying proficiently on its hundred legs wherever its inclinations might lead it. It was a contented centipede, active and effective. Then one day the centipede was halted on its rounds by a questioner. The questioner said: "Centipede, I am fascinated and astonished to observe how you walk around so proficiently while maneuvering no less than fifty pairs of legs. I should think it would be extremely difficult. Tell me, when you start to walk, which leg do you move first?"

Never in the entire life of the centipede — so active, so effective, so full of easy assurance — had this question ever occurred to its mind. It bent its intellect upon the question. Which leg — come to think of it — *did* one move first?

The centipede thought and thought. Leg number eight? Leg number fourteen? The centipede worked itself into an agony of analysis and indecision. And, so the story goes, the centipede was never never able to walk another step. Completely paralyzed by its insoluble intellectual problem, it remained immobile where it had been halted and slowly starved to death.

A-kin to this distressing tale is the only slightly less celebrated one, known as the story of Buridan's ass. It is supposed to have been invented by the enemies of that philosopher to ridicule his views about the operation of the will. The anecdote has it, at any rate, that a hungry ass was once placed, free of restraint, between two identically tempting bundles of hay which were exactly equidistant from it to the right and to the left. The miserable animal, since the attraction of the right hand bundle was exactly counterbalanced by the attraction of the left hand bundle, could (obviously) only remain motionless between the two, imprisoned in irresolu-

tion, until like the hapless centipede in the other story it died of starvation.

These ridiculous yarns have survived for a good many centuries, and they will undoubtedly continue to do so indefinitely. For they do illustrate, with a pleasant absurdity, the perils of a too-devoted intellection.

It is the intellect that has given our human kind all its many and peculiarly human distinctions. It is only because we possess intellectuality that we are able to build much more remarkable suspension-bridges than spiders can, and are able to compose music, design systems of politics and economics, and construct complicated theories of metaphysics. Indeed, it is only by virtue of our intellectual faculty that we are able to look forward into the future, and to summon and scrutinize the past, and thus to escape from that time-world in which all the other parts of nature are held forever as captives of the immediate. The intellect is a most precious and estimable tool, deserving all our championing and most assiduous training.

But it is in the very nature of this instrument — this faculty which permits its user to know himself as a self, and to look upon the whole scene of self and otherness with the kind of questioning called rationality — that it can become a danger. It can, that is to say, come to be so over-regarded by its user that he invests it with a sort of total authority which it does not in fact possess. Entranced by the efficiency and agility of his own power of

thought, a man can fall into the false pride of supposing that all truth whatsoever, to be accepted as legitimate and to be acted upon, must be intellectually established. This pride of intellect has of course been the immemorial disease of philosophers, and in less drastic forms it comes along to befuddle all of us now and then.

There results the spectacle of a philosopher writing eight or nine volumes of exquisitely complicated reasoning in an effort to prove, to the satisfaction of his intellect, that he exists. There result libraries-full of intellectual dissertations which seek to establish that the objective world is indeed really there, and that we really have a certain power of choice in the performance of our own acts, and that it is "better" in some logically and intellectually provable way to be alive than to be dead. Not very rarely, there results an unhappy man whose furious intellection has brought him to the impasse and paralysis of a total inability to believe *anything*. Unable, by thought, to establish any of those necessary first principles without which no edifice of belief can be built, he can only remain as tragically motionless as the introspective centipede and as the starving ass which had no logically defensible reason for choosing one bale of hay rather than the other one.

II

It is a salutary reflection that the overwhelmingly major part of the world of nature goes forward with no

intellection at all. Foxes breed and find their food and manifestly have fun in the meadow, though it can never have occurred to any fox to try to prove, in a set of vulpine syllogisms, that he really exists and really has fur on his haunches. No bird can ever have made an intellectual inquiry into whether, logically, it is desirable to utter a song at the rising of the sun. The sun is seen and felt, and a song wells up. No coon lies dozing delightedly in a tree-fork in the summer noon because he has established an unassailable demonstration that this is good. He feels it; he knows it; he acts on it.

What all animals act upon is describable, exactly enough, as animal faith. What they know, in their unself-conscious way, they know with dumb certainty.

Ourselves an animal, we bring to the life-experience as our primary equipment precisely the same kind of dumb certainty, the same sort of immediacy of unformulated conviction. We "know" that the world is real in the instant when our sensorimotor experience tells us that it is. We know, in the first instant of the experience of the self, that this is as compelling an awareness of the real as is our experience of the rough bark of a hemlock tree or our experience of the sound of the song of a bird. We know that it is good to play a game, and that it is good to lie down weary to sleep, and that the taste of food is a good and that the feel of the rain is a good. We know all these things, and a

thousand others, before we know we know them. They are our "given"; they are what is lodged in us; as immediate a provision as what informs the spontaneous psyche of any owl or bat or fox or bird as its awareness opens to the adventure of being alive. We know these first things, so to speak, by direct apprehension of our total organism.

No platoon of furrow-browed philosophers can "prove" these primary knowings. They are animally basic; and it is not possible for the intellect to get, as it were, behind them. They are not rational things. They are not things that may be made problematical, or that may be debated. They are first things. They are the sureties of animal faith. Who does not accept them does not accept the gift of life as it is given.

It may be galling to our pride, to be sure, to accept what we cannot compel to pass our proud intellectual tests. If we cannot affix the seal of our intellectual endorsement, we may be inclined to reject the offering. If we are to maintain our mental health and balance, however, the severe fact is that we have no choice.

Spiritual teachers have been saying for a good many ages that the most valuable and necessary thing in the world is probably humility. In the matter of the right use of the intellect, it is surely true. If we over-exalt it, and think to give it a God-like competence and universal authority, we end by its turning upon itself and destroying the validity of its own

conclusions. If we acknowledge it to be only what in truth it is — a useful faculty, but forever incompetent to penetrate to the heart of the great underlying mysteries and analyze them into terms of human comprehensibility — we can create, on the foundation of an animal faith which with humility we acknowledge to be unprovable, sound structures of intellection that are our race's lasting glory.

It is the fundamental fact of our human situation that before we can make an act of will, before we can make an act of thought, we have to make an act of faith. To be wise, we have to be willing to be woodchuck-simple. We have to be willing not

only, in Thomas Huxley's phrase, to sit down before fact like a little child; we have to be willing to be as spontaneously believing as a red-furred fox, as animally trustful as all the other creatures of the world of nature are. Make this initial act of faith, and the intellect and will are set free to think and act. Withhold this first allegiance, withdraw our animal faith, and we are paralyzed forever in a snare of sophistries.

What is required of us is only this: that we humble ourselves to creatureliness with all the rest of the brotherhood of the earth. What is required of us is only this: that we take on faith, with trusting hands, the gift of life as it is given, and bow our heads a little.

ON LOOKING INTO THE GRAND CANYON

BY WILBERT SNOW

Great scenery has filled me to the brim
Since waves first leaped with me on cliffs of Maine,
But not until I reached Grand Canyon's rim
Did I know the awe that makes all language vain;
I wondered then what star above this spot
Wore on its breast a jewel half so fair,
And envied constellations, whose fixed lot
Would let them nightly gaze and worship there.

The ages of the world are in this gorge;
Illimitable mystery haunts its haze;
The hammer and the anvil that can forge
So many miracles of stones and clays,
Preëminently here have shaped and driven
Fit buttresses for naves and vaults of Heaven.