

Yea, You

Who Needs Philosophy?

John Avey

Those of you who have spent the last few years in a cave or in a Trappist monastery may not be aware of a popular pastime that has swept America. . . well, not swept it, but brushed it thoroughly ever since the war in Vietnam became an issue.

The pastime is called Metaphysical Polticial One-Up-Manship or, as it is known among its friends—of whom I am one of the staunchest—"Moralism: the Game the Whole Family Can Play."

The rules are quite simple. Two or more can play and it can be played anywhere: at parties, in bed, in classrooms, on the beach, in public forums or at private dinners.

Someone—anyone, it really doesn't matter, but those of us who like to see the game well-played prefer that it be a Liberal or leftist radical—someone, at any rate, starts an argument about the Vietnam war. There are numerous ploys ("Corruption in Saigon" is one of the most well-known) to be thrown into the argument from time to time until a Certified Public Liberal says: "But the war is immoral!"

Then the fun begins. Shouting, moaning, hand-clasping (your own hands—no time for funny stuff yet) and schreeches of agony descend upon the unfortunate conservative who is the victim. He has to stand there and listen to the rest of the players scream at him about the immorality of it all. Violence is immoral, you know, and war is, after all, violence. . . or is it the other way around? . . . yes, that's it. . . war is immoral and violence is, after all, war, and. . . you know. . .

There is only one rule governing the game after this point has been reached. At no time must anyone ask: "What do you mean by immoral?" That sort of thing simply isn't done, old man. It leads to thinking and reason and examination of basic premises and God help us all . . . philosophy.

Yes, Virginia, there is philosophy, and although you don't hear much from her these days, you can bet your subscription to *National Review* that she is alive and kicking. And she has good reason to kick. Young conservatives have forgotten her. They have allowed the Libs and the Leftists and the Crazies to take the moral high ground in every debate. And that, brothers and teachers, is why we are losing. Not the war in Vietnam, but the war of the mind, the war fought every day, everywhere you go, in and out of the classroom.

Conservatives have made the mistake of fighting their intellectual enemies on ground chosen by the enemy. The enemy isn't concerned with the "what" of things, but the "how" of things; he does not care that a word like "immoral" is meaningless unless placed in some kind of philosophical context. It is enough for him that the word gets results. It puts conservatives on the

defense immediately (it is the most difficult thing in the world to prove to someone that you are not immoral) and begs the question: **what system of morality are you using to make the judgment that the war is immoral?**

Try asking that to a practitioner of moralism. In all probability, the Lib will fall back on some variation of Moral Relativism, a system that ceased to have any sort of intellectual respectability among the honest liberal intellectuals the moment the Nazis began murdering the Jews during the late 'thirties and early 'forties (I am convinced that it never had any respectability, but this is my day to practice charity). How can anyone now say that morality is a private affair and that one man's whims are not to be judged immoral by the whims of another? By that standard, no one could point to, say, Heinrich Himmler and say what he did was immoral. All a moral relativist can say is: "Himmler happened to think killing Jews was good. I do not agree. But I can't make any moral judgment on his action." In short, moral idiocy.

All of this is to introduce an idea: **we are in a war and it is war of philosophy.** The battles of the war are fought in many areas: in the classroom, in the media, in politics. But essentially the war is always the same: it is a war for the mind.

Conservatives cannot run around prattling about the eternal verities and basic principles until they have intellectually grasped just what those words mean and how they can be intellectually articulated to certain Libs who, for all their faults, show signs every now and then of wanting to join in a discussion instead of a verbal lynching.

May I make two suggestions concerning the ways in which conservatives can begin their philosophical renaissance, especially on campus?

The first is to ask a subdued liberal professor (one who doesn't foam at the mouth or hide under the desk when, say, Mr. Agnew is mentioned) to include as part of the required reading a small book, *The Public Philosophy*. It was written in 1955 and is available (or was available; I haven't seen it lately) in a Mentor paperback edition. It is a lucid, scholarly, intellectually challenging examination of the idea of natural law in Western society. It calls for a rediscovery of what the author calls "the public philosophy"—"the premise of the institutions of Western society."

Now for the shocker. The author . . . Russell Kirk? No . . . William F. Buckley? No . . . James Burnham . . . it's got to be Burnham...wrong again. Are you ready?

Walter Lippmann.

That's right, that man, the bete noire of conservatives for lo, these many years. And that, as we used to say on Broadway is

the beauty part. Here is a book urging that the Western liberal intellectuals revive the idea of natural law that has been the philosophical foundation of Western society for over two thousand years. And the author of the book is a Liberal of the blood royal, indeed, he is liberalism incarnate. Ah, the delicious irony of it all!

It is not an easy book. It is not, I fear, in parts a particularly readable one. Lippmann is not, say, Leo Strauss, and his argument is not as strong as it might be. But it can serve as an opening to the Right in your classroom. The usual reaction on the part of Liberals when natural law is mentioned is to claim that natural law is wholly connected with Roman Catholic doctrine (it isn't), is outdated (when?), is irrelevant (according to what standards of relevance, prithee?) and is, anyhow, not considered to be intellectually respectable (why?).

My next suggestion is to borrow from the left the "study group" technique. Surely you all remember those good old "Marxist Study Groups"? Well, why not conservative study groups? No conservative group on campus should be considered serious unless it has at least one evening a week set aside for serious discussion of philosophical problems, and that means going back to Burke and all the rest of the heavy hitters. Forget about what the Libs call relevance. Philosophy is the basic relevance. □

Some Veterans Weren't in Washington

Michael McCollum

It recently became apparent that the news media were going to undertake the patriotic task of reporting on the post-military activities of our Vietnam veterans. Being a Vietnam veteran myself, I looked to the occasion with great anticipation expecting to find out what my old friends from "the war" were up to these days. I must admit, however, that I was a bit skeptical of their intentions because of my memories of the way the courageous reporters covered our actions in combat.

But, being an eternal optimist, I gathered my wife and daughter around the TV, in a spirit of reunion on the evening of the first TV report. I half expected to see Roger Mudd interviewing my old buddy, Frank, who is now working and raising his family in Alaska.

The first report was quite a disappointment. The coverage was limited to the less than one-tenth of one per cent who, due to some apparent personal tragedy, had gone insane. They were in Washington for some sort of reunion or possibly to be near those in the government with similar problems and beliefs. At any rate, it was not a total disappointment because none of my old friends were present and it was good to know that they had survived, psychologically.

After watching subsequent reports, however, it became apparent that the

media were going to report on only these poor devils. It seems to me to be a grave injustice to these veterans who so obviously were suffering from mental instability. So complete was their psychosis that many had lost all shame and seemed to thrive on the exposure. It was also a disservice to us remaining veterans because no attempt was made to find out how many of these crazy people were really veterans. Since the report was filmed in Washington I imagine that it would be very easy for some of the local citizenry to mingle with these veterans, thus inflating their size.

By the end of the week I knew that the news media were up to their old tricks and if I wanted to find out what the majority of the Vietnam veterans were doing I'd have to find out on my own.

Using the latest statistical techniques—carrier pigeons, telephone taps, peeping toms, a classified number of informers and "reliable sources"—I compiled a survey of what veterans were doing last week. For the benefit of other veterans who might be interested, I shall include some of the more pertinent results.

Confirming the rumors that military indoctrination has many dangerous long-range effects it was found that most veterans took baths last week, many polished their shoes and some got haircuts. Almost sixty-five per cent were married, and many of them had at least one child.

Most of them reportedly loved their wives, though some loved other persons' wives. Some were divorced and a few were named as correspondents in divorce cases. As to their views on Vietnam, many didn't plan to vacation there this summer, while a few planned to send their in-laws and fifteen per cent were still taking penicillin.

Only a minuscule proportion of them reported that they had demonstrated, though a smaller number reported that they sold vacuum cleaners door-to-door. Most had just paid their federal income taxes. Many had full-time jobs, five per cent "were looking," about twenty per cent were in college, a few were in jail and about one per cent is presumably insane.

This should provide some insight into what the majority of the veterans are presently up to. I realize that the news media will be sick when they find that they have been "scooped," as this is the type of information on which they all survive when the crazy people aren't in town.

Having been "scooped" though, maybe now they will be forced to report the dull stories about the veterans who are proud to have served and have returned to society to lead normal, productive lives. It seems a shame for the media to stoop so low, but they must keep busy. Can you imagine a more pitiful sight than Walter Cronkite and Eric Severeid in an unemployment line?

fun of himself and of the exaggerated self-image he created, that neanderthal-man image sketched out by Lillian Ross in her New Yorker hatchet-job profile. (And it's this image, of course, which the more gullible of the boobs—Christopher Ricks, for instance, buy unquestionably.) "It would be nice to be like what they think," reflects Hudson, a sensitive man understanding the satisfaction and ease of those who are not very sensitive.

Other things: that remarkable ability to describe, so that we know exactly where his house is, what it looks like, how his boat handles; the ability, shared by no other contemporary writer, to record sensory impressions—how it feels to land a perfect six-inch punch, how a good cold drink on a hot day tastes: "Thomas Hudson took a sip of the ice-cold drink that tasted of the fresh green lime juice mixed with the tasteless coconut water that was still so much more full-bodied than any charged water, strong with the real Gordon's gin that made it alive to his tongue....and all of it tautened by the bitters that gave it color. It tastes as good as a drawing sail feels, he thought. It is a hell of a good drink." Hemingway never fails to make me thirsty. I remember once reading *The Sun Also Rises* and trying to match the characters drink for drink. I feel that way now. Forgive my typewriter if it begins to stagger.)

Islands in the Stream is flawed, of course, for it is unfinished. The things I mention above are instances of Hemingway's talent. In terms of craftsmanship, there are deficiencies. And this would not have pleased Hemingway. ("How can anyone think that you can neglect and despise, or have contempt for craftsmanship...There is no substitute for it, Thomas Hudson thought.") I tend to think that had he had time, Hemingway probably would have redone the ending of *Bimini* and worked the last two novels into one. But there wasn't time, of course, for when he found himself unable to do the work which made his life meaningful, Hemingway shot himself. But although *Islands* is technically flawed, the old talent is there. And as novelist Robie Macauley wrote in the best review of the novel: "How much better than a monument it is to publish, nine years after your death, a book much finer than any of the young contenders can write."

Isn't it Pretty to Think So?

Islands in the Stream

by Ernest Hemingway
Scribners, \$10.00



Critical fops like Christopher Ricks (in the New York Review of Books) had prepared me for a bad book, and Hemingway had never written a bad book. Even *Across the River and Into the Trees*, Hemingway's worst, was far better than what the competition produced.

But the fops were wrong again. *Islands in the Stream* is a first-rate piece of writing.

Islands is actually a trilogy consisting of three loosely related novels—*Bimini*, *Cuba*, *At Sea*—unified by the character of Thomas Hudson, a painter.

Each novel shows a mature Hemingway doing the things he does best better than he ever did them before. The dialogue between Hudson and Honest Lil the whore as they sit drinking in Havana's Floridita Bar, is as good as any of the exchanges between Brett Ashley and Jake Barnes.

But the conversations in *Bimini* between Hudson and his friend Roger Davis even top the wisecrackingly profound dialogue from the trout-fishing interlude in *The Sun Also Rises*—a dialogue I've always regarded as the single best piece of writing in American literature. (No writer, American or otherwise, has ever touched Hemingway's ability to write sustained dialogue. Period.)

There's a terrific fight scene (Christopher Ricks choked on it—it was so violent) in which Davis, throwing perfect economical punches, demolishes a drunken boor of a tourist, and an hilarious scene set in Mr. Bobby's bar in which Hudson and Davis outrage a group of yachtsmen by pretending to get the boys drunk. Running through this scene, as well as many of the others, is something we've never seen before—Hemingway making

the twenties ended in 1960

Islands set something off in me, something I'd almost forgotten about. A few months ago I wrote a piece for *The Alternative* in which I tried to define what it was that set my generation—the one that grew up in the fifties—so far apart from the generation that produced the New Left. It wasn't a satisfactory job, and I didn't know why, until very recently, when a friend in Washington, an alumnus of the same period, told me why. We weren't products of the fifties. We came out of the twenties and thirties, the last legitimate heirs of the Fitzgerald-Hemingway period. The twenties, my friend explained, ended in 1960. And he was right.

It's hard to try to explain why writers like Hemingway were so important during that period, for similar relationships don't exist today. But every so often, a