

Thought and the World of Action

A friend of mine—one with whom amity rests on understanding—writes me that “ideas have no commodity value today.” He does not elaborate. Therefore, the meaning of this remark must be garnered from the context of his background and his present preoccupation.

When one who dwells in the realm of ideas is suddenly thrust into a maelstrom of action—as, for instance, a college professor turned politician—the resulting sense of accomplishment is quite exhilarating. Now he is “doing something.” He is like a football player who after many rainy afternoons of blackboard instruction has finally dug his cleats into the sod.

There is a physical satisfaction which the ivory tower denied him. Things are moving; the ringing telephone portends importance; people are coming and going; orders are given and received; there is motion, noise, tense situations to meet, problems to solve—he is “doing something.”

It is natural and necessary that he should give value, “commodity value,” to the something he is doing. It is natural because self-sanction is compensatory. It is necessary because it makes for the efficiency that is reflected in the pay envelope. The man who does not enjoy his work places no value upon it, and hence loses in that self-esteem which is the balm of life; nor can he achieve the emoluments of success. Pride and profit lead to job-rationalization.

But objective values, those that obtain in the market place of history, have a way of making the hustle-and-bustle values of temporary achievement appear picayune. And these objective values are entirely in the field of ideas.

The glory that was Greece, as we see it now, was not in the make-work programs of Pericles but in the ideas expressed in its art and its philosophy; the grandeur that was Rome may have seemed at the time to be the conquest of the known world, while now we think of it in terms of Cicero, Plutarch, Cato, Vergil, et al. It is the ideas of Voltaire that now have “commodity value,” not the activity of the guillotine.

My friend might answer: “I am not interested, because I cannot influence the verdict of history; I am concerned only with those values which in my time and by my effort can gain currency.”

This point of view is sound and cannot be dismissed offhand as expediency. We must do things now, first because we live now, and sec-

only because we must live. But even the things we do are important only insofar as they express ideas, and their importance is in direct proportion to the soundness of these ideas.

We must dig potatoes or make shoes or write briefs, to sustain life. But we have a choice. We can do these things only because of the profit involved or we can grow better potatoes, fashion therapeutic shoes or build justice into our briefs. Or, better yet, we can do these things for profit and invest our lives with the most satisfying “commodity value”—ideas.

The glorification of action for action's sake is a soporific. It lulls that intellectual curiosity which makes for real action, a change in the status quo of thought. For it satisfies the restless soul with a refuge from reality; it substitutes physical exertion for mental adventure; it replaces the difficult value of ideas with the quasi-value of movement.

To this my friend might retort: “In the long run, it is true, ideas influence thought and change social conditions; but there is the immediate problem of existence that must be met, and the short-term policy most important to the contemporary scene requires the doing of something now.”

But if what can be done now must in its results invalidate basic principle is it even temporarily desirable? Is the palliative worth while if it makes the patient sicker and delays his recovery? Or kills him?

The yearning for palpable results is the mirage which unbalances the mind. It arises from an identification of one's corporeal and finite existence with all reality. It is the search for immortality here and now. It is compensation for the deflated ego. It is the sign of sophomore immaturity, but it is by no means the insignia of youth. It is the idolatry of evanescent success.

Calisthenics have their proper function, and in the routine of existence it is necessary that action must implement ideas and record results. But emphasis upon action per se, or idealization of recordable results, is like identifying amorous conquests with love. It is a false evaluation. The only true values are ideas, which, permeating the depth of the human mind, work in their inscrutable way toward a better world of better men.