

## What Is the School's Responsibility Toward Change?

*Some answers  
to this difficult question  
are suggested.*

"CHANGE" is a theme that has awakened much vital discussion in the history of ideas. As early as 500 B.C. specific attention was focused on this concept by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. He observed the instability and insecurity of both cosmic and human events. He had seen the great cultural centers of his day reduced to ruins. Wherever he looked, the physical universe itself manifested growth and decay, a rising and passing away. Change becomes the very heart of his philosophic system, for nature itself is viewed as an endless succession of changes. Heraclitus himself explained the universe (and all in it) by means of the well known metaphor of the ever-flowing stream.

Since Heraclitus' time, very few thinkers have denied the "reality of change," though many different interpretations of this phenomenon have been offered. However, this acceptance of the reality

of change usually has been accompanied by the search for some permanent and stable elements or the underlying principles. Plato found this permanency in the "realm of ideas" and the changing objects of sense perception are but imperfect copies or shadows of the changeless ideas. For him true knowledge consists in a rational grasp of the abstract and changeless ideas, laws, and systems of relations which are exemplified in nature.

Others found permanence in an ultimate infinite reality such as God who pervades all things or in some abiding principles such as matter and form. The latter, the Aristotelian hypothesis (matter-form) constituted the most dominant explanation until the 19th century for the obvious changes taking place in the universe. It is true that the Neo-Platonists were very influential in the early Christian era and in fact up to the 13th century. This influence was chiefly felt in the realms of ethics and religion. But Aristotle's views about the universe, both organic and inorganic, held sway and were not seriously questioned until the 19th century.

To the mind of this writer, the epochal publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* placed the problem of change in the center of philosophic controversy in such a manner as had not been done since the

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days of Heraclitus. Certainly, evolutionary hypotheses had been suggested before, but none seemed to have such great impact on the world of science and philosophy. It has been suggested that the advent of Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis forced philosophers, theologians and scientists to re-examine their most basic beliefs about the origin and development of the universe. No longer could one view change in the world as a simple cycle of life and death within each species (changeless form) be that of man, plant or animal. No longer could one accept the Aristotelian description of the physical universe, its age, its shape, its material origin and destiny as accurate simply because these descriptive propositions had been "logically deduced" from theoretical assumptions.

A new attitude toward "scientific truth" began to develop. Propositions about the physical universe lost their definitive and absolute character and assumed a cautious, tentative tone. Many an eminent scientist had to admit the limited applicability of the generalizations which resulted from his own researches. This new approach in no way detracts from the genius of Aristotle for, as Reiser (a non-Aristotelian) suggests, Aristotle himself was the eminent progenitor of this approach. Even his formal logic gave a significant place to the logic of discovery. Truly, Aristotle was the first scientist in the modern sense of the term.<sup>1</sup>

### Social Change

An almost immediate application of evolutionary theory was made to the social realm. Social Darwinism, as it is

<sup>1</sup> See the Forty-first Yearbook, Part I, National Society for the Study of Education, *Philosophies of Education*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 10-14.

sometimes designated, regarded society and culture as undergoing the same trends as physical organisms. Social forms of organization and structure, it was believed, were subject to the same general laws of change as were organic structures. Some social theorists identified evolution with progress and began to project into the future more perfect social structures. L. Gumplowitz, for example, believed that the concepts of struggle for existence, survival of the fittest and natural selection, apply to social groups as well as to biological species. One ethnic group comes in contact and conflict with another and the weaker succumbs. The group with the more advanced social form will conquer the one with the inferior form. Generally speaking, therefore, the newer the social structure the more advanced it will be.

Other theories of social evolution emphasized the various stages of social development based on the findings of the early anthropologists. Such theories focused upon the movement from simpler to more complex forms of social organization just as theories of organic evolution had done in regard to the development of more complex organisms from simpler ones. Thus, it was concluded that the existence of more complex (advanced) social structures parallel the existence of more complex human species. Whether social Darwinism or any of the various doctrines of social change are theoretically acceptable is not the concern of this essay. But the great bulk of evidence used in constructing such theories does confirm the "reality of social change" just as had been done by theories of biological evolution.

Further application of biological and social evolution soon appeared in the realm of value theory. It was this application of the concept of change which

stirred up great controversy among thinkers. It is true that evolutionary theories about the origin and development of the universe when they were first proposed caused great consternation among theologians and philosophers. It was not long, however, before most theologians and philosophers found that evolutionary theories could easily be fitted into existing thought systems without affecting radically the basic presuppositions of these systems. As one eminent theologian states it, "Evolution seems to be the basic pattern of the universe." He believes also that evolution applies to technology and those social structures in which technology is evolving.<sup>2</sup>

Though the acceptance of biological and social evolution has been quite general, there has been no such acceptance of an "evolutionary ethics" which makes moral values and standards subject to the same laws of change.

### The School and Change

The preceding brief historical survey indicates three basically different uses of the term, "change." The first refers to the application of the concept to the physical universe; the second, to the social structures within the universe; the third, to the realm of moral values existing within the social structures. Although this listing obviously does not cover all the possible uses of the term, it does contain some that are of major concern to the school.

The school's responsibility toward changes brought about by the evolutionary process in the physical universe seems to be twofold: (a) The school must acquaint its clientele with the major

changes that have taken place in the universe in the millions of years past. Many curricular patterns can be used to achieve this objective including both the traditional and the progressive (or combinations thereof). (b) The knowledge and understanding of the changes are in themselves inadequate.

Along with "knowing and understanding," the school must attempt to develop what might be called the "scientific attitude" toward change. This attitude involves a realization of the tentative nature of scientific propositions and theories. It prepares the student not only to expect change but actually to search for it. The student should not leave school believing all has been settled, scientifically. Actually, if this attitude is developed, the student might some day be among those who are pushing forward the frontiers of scientific knowledge and the schools themselves, especially at the higher levels, might form the vanguard of scientific change.

In all probability, there will be very little disagreement about the school's responsibility toward the changes wrought by evolution of the physical universe. But the question of the school's responsibility toward social change is much more complex. Most would agree that students should be made aware of the great social changes which have taken place over the centuries, and that changes will continue to take place as society becomes more complex. This objective might be realized either through "problem-centered" or "subject matter-centered" curricula. But, should the school be the vanguard of social change?

To adapt the question of G. S. Counts to the theme at hand: Dare the school change the social order? In their response to this question, educators are sharply divided into two camps. One, including

<sup>2</sup> See Gustav Weigel, S. J., "Christians Confront Technology," *America* CI (September 26, 1959), p. 762-64.

both humanists and progressives, maintains that it not only is not the school's responsibility to change the social order but the school has no right to propagandize or agitate for revolution or change in the social order. These educators believe that the school must deal with all the issues involved in social conflict and equip the students with the knowledge and understanding and those skills of thinking or problem solving which will enable them to make the social changes which are needed when they become members of the electorate. But the teacher should not advocate partisan belief in regard to social change and must remain "neutral" in the classroom. The teacher's right to propagandize for any "ism" should be exercised only outside the school.

### A Critical Attitude

By the same token, however, the school should not be in the service of "reactionary forces," according to the point of view stated above. Social change which brings about more advanced technology and the resulting release from human misery should be welcomed. Those educators who hark back to the "good old days" are just as much at fault as those who maintain the school must reconstruct the social order. For these educators, therefore, the school's role in effecting social change is not a primary one. Though the school cannot divorce itself from the changes emerging in society, and must as a natural consequence of modern development assume some new functions, it should never become the vanguard of social change.

A group of educational theorists who appeared on the scene during the depression days and have gained a "considerable following" since that time, insist

that the school cannot be neutral in regard to social change. They are convinced that the best means of bringing about needed social reform is through the agency of the school. Therefore, they maintain, educators should take the leadership in proposing an ideal (utopian) society to the youth under their care. The building of new social structures which favor *all* the people rather than any privileged group should, they contend, be advocated as the goal of the school in society. Such a goal calls for popular ownership (or control) of those institutions, natural resources, means of production, and services which affect all the people. The classroom, they maintain, should be a laboratory for testing the validity of these goals so that the student may put them to the test of experience in the "greater society" when they leave school.

They seem to believe that reconstruction of the social order must start in the school so that young hearts shall be fired with zeal for social reform. Only in this manner, they hold, shall the nation and the world be able to realize the ideals of universal equality (political, social and economic) in the very near future. If the school does not take the leadership, the needed reform may never come or may come too late.

A similar and fundamental difference in point of view is found in the interpretation given to the concept of change, as it affects ethical theory. For the sake of simplicity and brevity one might place educational theorists in two opposing camps on this issue also. The ethical relativists, basing their doctrines on a metaphysics of change, are convinced that moral values and ethical norms or standards are evolutionary just as are the physical and social spheres. The notion that

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ing them, educationally speaking, so that the new rural community will be a strong, prosperous and stable part of our American life.

True, we may say that change has affected the rural community to such an extent, that the whole concept of living

in the rural area must undergo a re-evaluation. From such a study new standards, new aims and concepts will be drawn. Under such able leadership, tomorrow will see a new and stronger rural life with a more abundant living for all.

### School's Responsibility

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right and wrong are sharply distinguishable does not, they contend, "square with the facts." One cannot point to any ethical proposition which has always been or always shall be the same, for as times and circumstances change all normative statements shall change.

The goal of the school, in this relativistic view, is to develop in students a critical attitude toward all moral codes. Students should be encouraged to criticize and discuss existing laws and customs involving moral conduct and participate in changing them so that they jibe with "social reality." Social acceptability is the criterion of good and evil, and the school must develop in students the means of determining what is socially acceptable. Such a goal cannot be achieved unless the school first eliminates the notion that there are changeless norms of moral conduct.<sup>3</sup>

In general opposition to the relativists are those who maintain that there are at least some ethical propositions which are never subject to change and should never be "as long as human beings are 'human.'" Among this group are those who believe that the decalogue (or similar codes)

<sup>3</sup> F. C. Neff. "Education and the Cult of Certainty." *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 1958). p. 168-70.

contains the few basic norms which are needed to guide moral conduct. Most defenders of these codes admit that critical and imaginative reinterpretation and adjustments must be made to fit the changing times (obviously, the application of the principles of justice are much more complex in modern industrial society than they were in primitive patriarchal tribes). Yet others who do not accept an "outside source" of morality, insist that there are some enduring and changeless values found in the accumulated fund of human experience, in "nature" or "society." Some such are justice and law, freedom and equality, which, they maintain, should be consciously transmitted through the agency of the school.<sup>4</sup>

Admittedly, the educational theorists of this latter group do not agree on one set of values which should be considered "changeless and enduring," for example, supernaturalists and naturalists propose a different hierarchy of values. They do agree, though, that there is a basic core of values and it is the school's responsibility to inculcate these in the youth of school age.

<sup>4</sup> For an expression of the non-relativistic view, see I. Berkson, *The Ideal and the Community*, Harper and Brothers, 1958, p. 279-82. Also, the Fifty-fourth Yearbook, National Society for the Study of Education, *Modern Philosophies and Education*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 37 ff., 323 ff.

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