

IMPRESSIONS AND REFLECTION*

In a degree that is without historic precedent we are, today, living in the midst of massed impressions. Political and other events are occurring with extraordinary rapidity and, by reason of our highly developed means of communication, we become very quickly informed concerning them. In the field of entertainment, as a result of the development and technique of the cinema and radio, we are subjected to impressions faster than we can assimilate them. As a result of this, the consciousness of the individual who keeps informed with respect to events, attends the cinema in considerable measure, and/or who habitually listens to the radio is impressed by impacts more rapidly than can possibly be matched by the process of assimilation. The result is a state of consciousness that is more informed than possessed with understanding and more entertained than effectively oriented to life.

The advantages of our efficient means of communication and entertainment are obvious and have been well recognized. But it is law that every asset has its corresponding liability and thus the total value and significance of such an asset cannot be appreciated properly unless it is balanced against the corresponding liability. Sometimes the compound resultant constitutes a real gain and, at others, a genuine loss.

It is also true that a judicious use of the asset may reduce the liability so that the net effect is positive, whereas otherwise the resultant is negative. It is thus well that we should give more attention to the liabilities of our developments in communication so that we may be the

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better prepared to correct them.

When the interest of libido is focused too exclusively upon impressions the resultant state of consciousness becomes very superficial. It is as though the soil of the mind were being planted continuously with new seeds, each new planting occurring before the old seeds have had opportunity to germinate and grow. The resultant is a maze of incipient germination of uncoordinated impressions that never have an opportunity to develop into the fruitage of real value and significance.

The state of dominant impressionism corresponds to the psychological attitude of extreme extraversion. Now the effect of over-extraversion is the loss of individuation. The human unit becomes less and less a self-determined individual and more and more like the flotsam that is driven hither and yon by the currents of the sea. In this case the human flotsam becomes the plaything of the psychical currents which may be very readily generated and directed by powerful men. When a large proportion of the human mass is reduced to this state of extreme extraversion the threat to liberal institutions becomes very grave.

If one studies the propaganda techniques of the totalitarian states he will find that it consists very largely in the superimposition upon the consciousness of the population of a mass of impressions, done in such a way as to discourage reflection. The effect is to reduce the population to mere puppets that, perforce, must respond as the manipulators of the psychical strings direct. The result is that the states grow in power

and the number of truly cultured individuals is vastly reduced.

It is quite evident that the radio especially has increased the facility with which ambitious men may acquire dictatorial power. It is also evident that both the radio and the cinema through the use of rapid sequence of impressions tends to depress reflection and thus operates against the development of real culture, In these respects we have the outstanding liabilities of these two social instruments. Now, if the general mass of people cannot learn how to protect themselves from these liabilities it is entirely possible that the radio and cinema may prove to be greater evils than blessings. At least it must appear so to one who attaches the superior social value to true culture and genuine liberal institutions.

A necessary condition of individuation is a strong development in the roots of consciousness. If the roots are well established then the loss of surface values at any time is of only passing significance. From deeply grown roots new growth with its flowering and fruiting can always spring forth afresh. But when the roots are shallow massive cultural death becomes a grave possibility. Now, no ~~imp~~ seed of impression can develop into a deeply rooted system save by a process of assimilation or reflection in the hidden recesses of the individual consciousness. This is a process of introversion. But introversion is prevented by the presence of too many external impressions, since the psychical energy di-

verted by the impressions ribs the introverted root-building process of the energy which it needs.

Though it is possible for an individual or a society to become overly introverted, the Occidental portion of humanity is very far from any such danger when taken as a whole. The massive corrective needed is a radical reduction of impressions combined with the cultivation of self-directed reflection. The former part of this corrective is negative the latter positive.

Several devices may be employed by the individual for the guarding of himself from the impact of too many impressions. He can refrain from the indiscriminate use of the radio and the cinéma. He can choose what he will hear and see and shut himself away from the rest. He can restrict his reading to selected material. And, if he lives among the masses of a large city, he can form the practice of closing out impressions in large measure that do not have a bearing upon his individual function. This latter process is, admittedly, difficult, for massive impressions are continually forcing themselves upon consciousness through the eyes and ears. Unlike the instances of the radio and the cinema, these sense-impressions cannot be prevented so long as one moves physically in the midst of them. But a sense-impression can be denied apperceptive recognition. By this means the impression touches only the surface consciousness but does not penetrate into the deeper level where judgment functions. When using this technique the focus of the eye may actually pass over the surrounding objects and yet the effect remain that of a

sort of blur without meaning. As the individual becomes proficient he acquires the power to see without seeing thus leaving his deeper reflective consciousness free in the process of segregating the meaning underlying previously chosen and accepted impressions. It is true that this technique is not only difficult but it does involve some danger. For no one on a city street can afford to ignore the impressions that are relevant to his movements. To cross a street at the wrong time might be fatal, and the choosing of the right time is dependent upon certain appropriate impressions. Thus the mind must be taught to be selective, so that it receives the appropriate impressions consciously while it represses the others.

When an individual's duty forces him to live in an environment of a too vast number of impressions he should provide for periods of, at least, relative solitude. The selective isolation from impressions outlined in the last paragraph requires the use of a distinctly positive will and considerable psychic energy and, in time, the fatigue effect becomes severe. In the state of solitude this effort can be relaxed and, in that way, the necessary rest may be realized.

But success in the reduction of the number of impressions solves only one-half of the problem. This must be supplemented by the positive encouragement of active reflection and meditation. If these two functions have not been established as habits they must be started and continued by the active exercise of the will. Real thinking does not happen of itself. That which is often

called thinking and which does happen of itself is really no more than a stream of psychical impressions. Most of so-called thinking is of this sort and much of ~~it~~ it is sheer waste of psychical energy. It is, in fact, the kind of thinking that is the "slayer of the Real", and must be mastered just as carefully as the more external kind of impressionism. It is not the kind of thought that deepens the roots of consciousness. True thinking calls for directed effort and often a considerable application of the will. But with practice less and less ^{consciously directed} will is required and, in time, directed thought becomes a habit. In time this kind of thought becomes established in the deeper roots of consciousness and then it, also, may become spontaneous and carry inspirational value. But by the time this stage is reached individuation has become well established.

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