

The Obvious Alternative

The Quest for Excellence: The Neo-Conservative Critique of Educational Mediocrity, by Norman R. Phillips, *New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1978.*
viii + 179 pp. \$8.50.

AMERICAN secondary school education is now at a stage at which it is no longer uncommon to read of a high school graduate bringing suit against his Board of Education for awarding him a diploma without teaching him to read. In turn, those colleges and universities willing to admit semi-literates find that they must devote most of the freshman year to remedial reading and basic grammar. High school students may earn impressive grades in woodworking, sex education, and self-analysis. And too often they find universities

willing to offer them degrees in athletics, first aid, and other such fields of "study." The result has been the degradation of education, and of society itself.

In the face of this far-reaching reduction of American education to the least common denominator, Dr. Norman R. Phillips has contributed a masterful analysis of the obvious alternative, and, one must conclude, the last hope for American education. That is, what his neo-conservatives advocate: a return to the study and understanding of humane values, the values manifested in the intellectual tradition that derives from the thought of Plato and Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas and Edmund Burke.

Phillips considers his neo-conservatives in two broad categories: the distinct schools of traditional humanism, represented by T. S. Eliot and Russell Kirk, and of positivist humanism, as expressed in the views of Irving Babbitt and G. H. Bantock. A separate chapter is reserved for Bernard Iddings Bell, whose forthright espousal of religion as the focus of education sets him apart from the others as a matter of emphasis. The treatment of the five philosophers is thorough and businesslike, a difficult and admirable achievement in so short a book. It is evident that one of Phillips' main challenges was selecting the men to write on. Kirk was an obvious choice, but Eliot is considered on the basis of his essays, *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Notes on the Definition of Culture*, both given at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1939. Since these are at least as much philosophical groundbreaking as commentary on education, other, likeminded thinkers might have been chosen. C. S. Lewis comes to mind, particularly in his series of essays on medieval life. *The Discarded Image*. However, Phillips' decision to include Eliot works brilliantly, since he was also an influence on the positivist, Bantock.

Though on most counts the views of Phillips' neo-conservatives are close kin, his treatment highlights the crucial distinctions of emphasis among them. He examines the broad concepts of conservative thought, which form the basis of all he says about education:

natural law, the historical ordering of values, the hierarchical concept of the world. For the traditionalists, Kirk and Eliot, an historical view of religion is important, though their thought tends to begin with spiritual values rather than lead toward them, as is the case with Bell. For Kirk, an awareness of history, including family and folk history, brings to the individual a sense of place, of who he is, and what his role in life shall be. Eliot focuses on culture, especially the cultural diversity of peoples, which must be carefully nurtured, not uprooted, by education.

The views of the positivists, Babbitt and Bantock, are characterized as being more attuned to critical reasoning and less to tradition. Babbitt, particularly, was skeptical of re-establishing conservative values in education through the lessons of history and religion. He was disgusted by the avarice he saw in business and in higher education, as universities appeared to him to be training an elite of money, not wisdom. To Babbitt, the attainment of wisdom was the paramount goal of higher education. He saw a need to reach back into the past for the old values of decency, industry, and, most important, self-control, in order to combat the growing materialism and permissiveness of American society. Only a gifted few, who would form a new intellectual and moral elite for America, would do so. Bantock, the British scholar and philosopher, was typical of the neo-conservatives in his alarm at the spread of egalitarianism at all levels of education in the West. Less the positivist than Babbitt, he was influenced by Cardinal Newman and by Eliot. Bantock's thinking was cultural, like Eliot's, but he was more specifically concerned with education. He was angered by permissiveness and mental therapy, and fought the education technicians who tried to ease the student's way in college by reducing tension and pressures. Bantock believed a degree of pressure was necessary for real learning.

The final figure considered by Phillips is the religious traditionalist, Canon Bernard Iddings Bell. His contributions to neo-conservative thought cannot exactly be defined as a synthesis of Kirk's and Babbitt's

because they are thoroughly original, but the similarities with both are obvious. His scholarly sensibilities place him with the traditionalists, but his ventures into the realm of the practical, particularly his assertion that a value-oriented education must begin in elementary school, mark him as being quite independent of both the positivists and the "aesthetic" traditionalists.

Phillips' observations on his five neo-conservatives are perspicacious and precise. They form a preface to his sixth chapter, in which he eloquently summarizes neo-conservatism as a philosophy of education: the emphasis on transcendent values; the fostering of spiritual and intellectual growth; and, most significantly, the idea that education must aim at the development of a humanist elite, *not* the indiscriminate uplifting of the masses. One of his most important comments is the observation that practical application of conservative principles in education would resemble *Gestalt* psychology: an interactive process, in which the teacher and student play significant roles, with the teacher seeking to determine the talents and abilities of each student, and modifying his lesson plans accordingly. Emphasis would be on individual, rather than group achievement.

Phillips is most lucid and forceful in his discussion of why neo-conservatism must be the educational philosophy of the future in the United States. Neo-conservatism is, of course, a reaction; in education, it is a reaction—wholly positive and conservative—to the tragic consequences of our public schools' attempt to give every American a college degree. When the President's Commission on Higher Education recommended that higher education be made "less verbal and less intellectual," it was in sharp disagreement with the neo-conservatives. As Phillips points out, even liberals are questioning the preoccupation with relativism and egalitarianism in the public schools, making the connection between the aimlessness and alienation of so many young people today and their education. The Watergate affair, he remarks, especially highlighted the creeping failure of the educational system to instill

moral values through the indiscriminate populism and obsession with handing out degrees. In the face of the dismal failures of this heretofore widely-admired approach, the neo-conservatives, including Phillips, are being vindicated by the "back to basics" movement in many school districts. As this welcome development spreads, Phillips' book should be on every high school principal's bookshelf.

Reviewed by EDWARD J. WALSH

False Idols

After Reason, by Arianna Stassinopoulos,
Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.: Stein and Day,
1978. 240 pp. \$10.00.

IN THIS SIGNIFICANT, illuminating, well-written, and trenchantly-argued work, Miss Stassinopoulos sets herself against the false but powerful idols of modern man, arguing persuasively and forcefully the need for moral and spiritual regeneration. She rightly observes that we are everywhere confronted with the seven false idols of modern man: utilitarianism, functionalism, triviality, quantification, mediocrity, fetishism, and fragmentation.

The pernicious effects of utilitarianism are pervasive: Can anything have value unless it is useful, or is able to bring, to acquire or to produce money? Utilitarianism means that we measure the worth of everything—even human lives—by the criterion of utility, of usefulness. It becomes easy to adopt a favorable attitude towards abortion and euthanasia. For example, if we measure an elderly person's worth by his "usefulness" to his family or to society, then of what worth is a person who cannot provide for himself? Why bother to spend money to provide food and clothing for someone who is of "no use" to his family or to society? And if he becomes ill, why should doctors and nurses make an effort