

A NEW PROJECT FOR HUMAN HAPPINESS

[Convinced as we are of the unity of all Life, from which it follows that mankind and its individual units are affected by the health and well-being or the reverse of the humbler consciousnesses that make up the kingdoms below man, we are in cordial sympathy with the "New Project for Human Happiness" which **Dr. Alexander F. Skutch** puts forward here. If there were more such scientists with reverence for Life in every form, the progress of science might be less spectacular along destructive lines, but who can doubt that Nature would reveal to sympathetic eyes many a treasure safely hidden from cruel and exploiting hands? We are living in what Plato called a barren period, when the occult powers of minerals and plants and animals are out of sympathy with man. Dr. Skutch's project would, if implemented, make for the restoration of that sympathy. "Help Nature and work on with her; and Nature will regard thee as one of her creators and make obeisance."—ED.]

I see the reader's lips expand in a smile as he glances at my title—a sarcastic, or perhaps at best an indulgent, smile. He will recall numberless schemes for human betterment and happiness, ranging in date from Plato's *Republic* to works of which the ink is scarcely dry, and in scope from well-integrated plans for the revision of man's social, political and moral life to simple formulas for the success and happiness of the individual. He will remember schemes for human happiness launched by feather-brained visionaries, by ecstatic poets and by profound philosophers; then he will recollect with a sigh that, after several millennia of planning and hoping, mankind appears today as far from the attainment of lasting happiness as in any previous era of recorded history.

This smile and these reflections which I foresee that my subject will evoke would stay my pen, were it not for my belief that I have dis-

covered the flaw or omission in all previous comprehensive schemes for human happiness—or at least in such of them as have come to my attention. This omission is so obvious that a child might detect it; yet such is mankind's blind absorption in man that it has escaped the philosophers.

Before considering the happiness of men collectively, let us again remind ourselves of some of the essential conditions of happiness in the individual. It is a truism expressed in many a parable and allegorical romance that those who deliberately set out to seek personal happiness as an object fail to find it, but become increasingly confused as their quest is lengthened, until they are in peril of degenerating as they grow old into bitter cynics or peevish hypochondriacs. But the more fortunate of these seekers abandon the futile hunt before it is too late; instead of searching for happiness, they seek

knowledge, or devote themselves to projects for the welfare of their fellow-men, or merely cultivate their garden, thereby finding a measure of the contentment which had eluded them while they focussed their attention upon the perfection of happiness. For Happiness is such a coy creature that she invariably flees from him who chases her; yet when he has grown weary of the pursuit and become absorbed in other matters, she often steals up behind to whisper words of cheer.

Most of us have known people who have attained an enviable degree of happiness by devoting themselves unselfishly to the welfare of other men, or to that of non-human creatures. Recently we have had the heartening spectacle of a whole city in America "adopting" a town of the same name in Europe, helping it with money and materials to recover from the shock of war, its own citizens thereby discovering a purpose and zest in living which hitherto had been lacking. It seems strange, then, that none of the grandiose schemes for assuring happiness to a nation, or to the human species as a whole, has taken into account this simple principle of devotion to something outside—something familiar and tangible, not something mystical and elusive. Each has tacitly assumed that man could become happy through considering the happiness of mankind alone; the result has been increasing despair.

Is there nothing outside our own species that can be favourably in-

fluenced by ourselves and is at the same time big enough to absorb the efforts of mankind as a whole? Those of a proselyting turn of mind might suggest missionary work among the Martians; but this project had best be held in abeyance until communications with the supposed inhabitants of the ruddy planet are somewhat improved. Besides, it may well turn out that the Martians, if there be Martians, have far more to teach than to learn from us.

But here, on our own more massive planet, we are surrounded by a myriad living things of a multitude of kinds. Can we do nothing to make them happier, to make life better for them? Can we only kill, subjugate, maim and destroy? Must this earth continue progressively to become a worse rather than a better place for life as a whole, because one particular vertebrate animal out of many happened to develop a freer association of ideas and an opposable thumb? Beyond a shadow of doubt, this planet would support more kinds of living things in a more thriving state if man had never appeared to make such egregious demands upon its productivity. At very best, we can at present hope to do no more than straighten out some of the havoc we have wrought. But the task of making amends to Nature, of giving partial compensation, is great enough and noble enough to engage the best efforts of mankind as a whole.

The degree of happiness which non-human creatures are capable of

experiencing is, like the existence of matter itself, one of the speculative questions of philosophy, beyond positive demonstration. Views on the subject range all the way from Wordsworth's poetic "faith that every flower enjoys the air it breathes" to Cartesian theories of animal automatism. The truth, as usual, doubtless lies somewhere between the extreme views; although we cannot demonstrate the happiness of non-human creatures—or even of other men—we may at least adumbrate it by what Santayana so well calls "imaginative sympathy." If we believe that non-human beings can be consciously happy, the effort to give them happiness is a worthy undertaking through which we can increase our own.

Or, if we lean toward a more objective view, we may look upon the whole of Nature as a sort of composite organism or a great, closely integrated community, subject to health and disease in much the same manner as an individual. Then if Nature is in a healthy condition, with all her parts well attuned and balanced, animals of each species are likely to enjoy whatever happiness their psychic organisation admits. Whichever view we take, our mode of procedure will be much the same, and the results the same.

I should not take exception to man's conventional boast that he is lord and master of the earth if he meant what he says. True lordship over any domain involves duties and obligations as well as privileges; it

is at best about three parts hard work and one part enjoyment. But the work—to administer wisely, to construct, to conserve—gives its best zest to the enjoyment. Far from taking this attitude, man has always been as a prodigal who has come into his inheritance, the natural world, to enjoy and exploit it as his personal estate, giving no thought to what entered into the creation of this magnificent patrimony, or to what is entailed in its upkeep, or to the just expectations of his successors.

The wastrel's swift course of violent pleasures yields neither real satisfaction nor enduring happiness. Traditionally, he either reforms, becomes the careful husbandman, the far-seeing lord of his domain who "wears his manhood hale and green," or else he dies a wretched pauper. Men, collectively, must either outgrow their profligate non-age and take hold of their patrimony in common careful managership, or sink into bankruptcy, misery and exhaustion.

A widely diffused sense of obligation toward their common heritage, the natural world, would give to men as a whole a unity of purpose and a true perspective of their inevitable mutual interdependence such as they have never hitherto known. Any association between individuals or groups is stronger when founded upon some external object or purpose than when based merely upon self-interest. A marriage is more likely to be successful if it produces children for whose welfare the parents

are deeply concerned than when it is childless; a degree of mutual affection inadequate to hold a childless couple together may suffice to bring tolerable contentment to a husband and a wife united in their endeavour to give the youngsters a happy childhood and a good education.

Associations grounded in self-interest, whether in pleasure or material profit, thrive so long as they yield enough of the desired commodity to satisfy the members, but quickly fall apart when they fail to appease the claims of personal advantage; only associations based upon some strong ideal possess the vitality to survive long periods of reverses and disasters. Leagues between sovereign states hold firmly in the face of threats or aggression by outside powers but disintegrate in times of security, because the constituent nations are no longer bound together by coincident self-interest. The fundamental cause of the instability of unions among nations has been the absence of any common objective or external principle of unity; each state thought only of its own advantage, and all associations founded upon self-interest are stable only so long as they administer profusely to the vanity, greed or love of pleasure of the members.

Men, I fear, will inevitably continue to fight so long as their only ground of unity is the common welfare or happiness of mankind; for this is fundamentally a selfish basis of association: happiness and well-being are goods which each ard-

ently desires for himself; and we are congenitally so blind that in spite of repeated lamentable demonstrations to the contrary we believe that victory—of which naturally we feel confident before we take up arms—will bring us a larger measure of these blessings.

Nations would be more firmly bound together and less likely to bare fangs and fly at each other's throats were they united by some common external object of solicitude. This of course must be a great and comprehensive object—and what more ample and all-embracing than the health and well-being of the natural world that is our common heritage? If mankind cared ever so little about the natural health of the planet, men would find so many and such cogent reasons for not waging war—over and above considerations of the harm they inflict upon each other and upon themselves—that armed conflicts would have to cease. For modern even more than ancient warfare broadcasts havoc over the face of the earth, brings disaster to many creatures in addition to man, and accelerates the exploitation of irreplaceable natural resources. Insatiable demands for lumber doom millennial forests to the axe; the earth is ripped open for more and more minerals; farmlands are mined by destructive practices that we would not countenance in peace time, for soldiers need food even when fertilisers are unavailable.

We invade remote islands to establish military bases, dispossessing the

sea-birds which for centuries have nested there undisturbed, exterminating some of the rarer forms of island life. Our shells and bombs and poison gases kill and maim countless inoffensive wild creatures along with the humans for whom they are more specifically intended. Wastes from sunken vessels and blasted factories pollute the waters of ocean, lake and river, bringing widespread destruction of life. To one genuinely concerned for the beauty of the earth and the welfare of its inhabitants, the consideration that oil, spreading over the surface of the water from sunken ships, clogs the feathers and causes the death of beautiful sea-fowl, would be a sufficient deterrent to waging war.

I can imagine no endeavour more sublime, nor any fitter to direct the best energies of all men toward a single goal, than that to preserve the beauty, natural health and biological balance of the planet upon which they dwell. Most men profess some religion, or believe in the existence of some transcendent creative force to which they owe their being. Yet they have never been able to reach general agreement in matters of religion, or to hold common views on the attributes of the unknown power. But all, I believe, must agree that the visible world of mountains, rivers, forests, and multiform living things is the visible cloak and tangible manifestation of that mysterious force which all religions hold in reverence—the only manifestation they can know, save as they know

the stars as points of light and scarcely comprehensible mathematical abstractions. Hence all men, irrespective of creed or philosophy, might with religious fervour join in the pious task of preserving the Creator's handiwork in its pristine majesty and loveliness, each reserving to himself the right to indulge in such private interpretations of its significance as appear true to him.

Religion also teaches that we serve our Creator by serving our fellow-men ; but this is only a partial service limited by human egotism and corresponding to a narrow and imperfect concept of the scope and grandeur of creation. As though we alone of all creatures were worthy of being served ! True worship consists in wide-eyed reverent contemplation of the whole of creation, in so far as it can be known to our limited faculties ; adequate service is service to all created things, in so far as we can preserve or help them in their own strivings toward perfection, or increase the harmony among them. Of all great religions, Buddhism in some of its forms comes closest to this ideal, but it magnifies pity as a motive, when love and admiration are stronger guides.

On the general health and wholesome balance of Nature depend the happiness and well-being of countless living things, including ourselves. When we think in terms of the happiness of men alone we are essentially narrow and selfish, and pay the usual penalty of selfishness in involution of aims, pettiness, exclusiveness

and eventual frustration. When we expand our aims to include life as a whole we become altruistic, fix our thoughts on a purpose ample and comprehensive enough to absorb them and are able to join with others in felicitous work toward a common objective.

From whatever angle we look at the matter, it is evident that this is our only hope of finding enduring happiness. On the biologic side we recognise that man is one member of a vast community of living things, that in the long run his well-being is linked with that of the other members of his community, and that he will ultimately be damned or blessed along with the rest of them. On the psychologic side, common experience tells us that we do not become happy by explicitly seeking our own happiness but by dedicating ourselves to something beyond and above ourselves.

The great merit of this project is that it is big and little enough to engage all men everywhere, collectively and as individuals. It is big enough to engage nations on a continental or world-wide scale, as in conserving the life of the oceans, or safeguarding the purity of mighty rivers. Yet every man can further the cause individually, by planting a tree, by helping to keep the roadsides attractive, by holding in check his unworthy impulses to kill and destroy wild life, or by refusing to use products which are obtained with undue waste of natural resources or suffering of wild creatures. And the man in the North who befriends the birds that nest in his dooryard joins in a common endeavour with the man beyond the Equator who protects these same birds in their winter home, although the two may never meet or hear each other's name.

ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH
