

Elisée Reclus

The Ideal and Youth

1895

If the word "Ideal" has really any meaning, it signifies far more than a vague yearning for better things, wearisome search for happiness, or a fitful and sad longing for an environment less hateful than the society of to-day; ah yes, we must give to the term an exact value, we must settle resolutely and intelligently what is the ostensible end of our ceaseless aspirations. Let us investigate then that Ideal.

For some it would be no more than a return to the ages of the past, to the childhood of humanity; it would consist in the negation of science, in a humble prostration as of old in front of a thunderous Sinai, and under the eye of a miracle-working Moses, the authoritative translator of the divine will. To that conception of complete renunciation and obedience Anarchists place in opposition another, proudly consistent with the fullest individual liberty and also with the voluntary action of society — the spontaneous action rendered possible by the suppression of privilege and of arbitrary authority, by the abolition of private ownership, by mutual respect, and by intelligent co-operation with natural laws. Between those two ideals there is no possible compromise: conservatism and moderatism, liberalism, progressivism, and even socialism are only political expedient — designed to delay the good time coming, to stop with a few crumbs of liberty the mouths of those who demand the full loaf. To be delivered from the throes of evolution, man must either lose himself in God, or, as a being, erect and free, become his own master.

Let it only take into consideration the latter alternative, towards which indeed all young people, in whom the the glorious possibilities of life are latent, consciously or unconsciously direct their thought and effort. Alas, the majority act and think towards this end unconsciously. They wander hither and thither, without set purpose, sceptics and pessimists in theory, although fortunately their action is frequently inconsistent with their profession. Above all it is important both for them and for ourselves to get rid of the language of despair. On what kind of future could we reckon if it was true that, spite of all appearance to the contrary, there were nothing new under the sun, and that all human struggles were mere conflicts of brute force, in which as matter of course, the weak must invariably be driven to the wall? Of what use in that case would it be to dream and talk of better social environments where there would be food for all, liberty and justice for all? Our words would be only a passing sound, and the wise man, as Ecclesiastes said more than two thousand years ago and as poets and rhymesters have since then often and variously repeated, would be content to eat, drink, and make merry. To take life as it comes would be true philosophy, and if it should be burdened by too many troubles or too many sorrows, the best thing to do would be to put an end to it. A little ball of lead, a tiny drop of poison, and the poor farce of existence, would be played out.

Although suicide is unquestionably rare among young people, the mode of thinking that justifies it is only too common; and besides there are many ways of entering upon death without the vulgar shedding of blood. Perhaps the most convenient is to cease to live in any real sense, to give up the use of the mind, to come to the conclusion that there is nothing more to be known, to drift like a straw on the flood, to take our opinions ready made and repeat them like a parrot, to look contemptuously on all independent efforts and speculation; and although a return to old-world superstition be impossible, for we cannot resurrect the past, these dead in life pretend to be still of the flock of the faithful, they talk about the articles of the creed, and practise the antics prescribed by the priests. Without force of character or strength of will to discover the truth, they become cowardly hypocrites, and soon they reach the end they have sought, the annihilation in themselves of every noble human quality. That is the real death; let the cessation of breath be swift or slow to follow, it only causes to be laid in a coffin an object that was long ago a corpse.

But as decided not to see, not to hear, as may be pessimists and men of pleasure — the worst, of the pessimists — they see that a change is brooding over the near future: like passengers in a ship making its way across a stormy sea they feel the trembling of the timbers, the vibration of the vessel on which they are voyaging, and spite of themselves are awe-struck by the possibility of imminent disaster. To-morrow throws its troublesome shadow over to-day: the “social question,” or to use their own language, “social questions” stand well out in the foreground of their outlook, and they know that obstacles and delays, however caused, are all in vain to prevent a speedy solution. The new era is at the door, and the great problem demands to be settled and bids all other questions take a back seat.

Among the sayings ascribed to the traditional Christ there is one that pious comfortable zealots roll under their tongue with holy pleasure, and it is this: “Ye have the poor always with you.” But out of the depths is now heard a voice crying: “Why always?” Even lately some believed that the earth could not produce enough of the means of existence for those who hoed on it, and that to get a share it was necessary to struggle with other men in the like need, fighting like hogs for the refuse thrown into their troughs. That is still the doctrine of some political economists, and those who teach it set it forth with the greater unction after a good dinner. But now even the poor have ascertained that the world produces enough and to spare for bread, and that if men were only free and equal the wants of all might be satisfied. Do you think that after this simple truth has been mastered by the human mind the contest will continue? Nay verily, society will be re-organized: in accordance with facts. We shall no longer hear that ceaseless, sad, and pitiful voice calling from the depths, “Bread! Bread!” making all work a pain, and robbing life of every joy.

So we come to the turning point of history. All the social troubles and revolts of past ages have had, under a thousand different phases, one fundamental cause — the want of bread, and that continual source of feud and hatred is about to be abolished. Now at last the world is going to revolve on its own axis, and the workers of the world are going to take their affairs into their own hands. Short as may be the span of human life when compared with the gradual evolution of humanity, there are some of us who may be present when the great change comes, and all of us may by opening our eyes [to] greet the dawn of the new day. And at this crisis, forsooth, we read of young people, careless of what the future may bring forth, who are worn out with ennui, and who pretend to welcome death with the saying that “life is not worth living!”

Yet it would seem but natural that youth all over the world, with its characteristic impetuosity, should rush to open the doors for the new era, should set itself on tiptoe to watch the coming of the future. We recall how eagerly the German students got ready for the fray when it was necessary to overthrow the Napoleonic tyranny, how splendidly the young men of the French universities took the part of right against might at the close of the Restoration, and in the years immediately preceding the Revolution of 1848. The students of that time were far less numerous than they are today, but they played a finer part in the history of their country. They threw themselves into all the struggles, romantic, republican and socialistic, of that fateful period, and denied that any class in the nation was as receptive as themselves to new idea. Nor was it merely the license of poetic dreamers, the exuberance of animal spirits, or a theatrical display of contempt for the bourgeoisie. How many of them braved imprisonment and even death for their opinions! How many of them, inspired by missionary zeal, became the apostles of a revolutionary altruism, flinging away fortune, position, and monetary advantage! When Saint Simonism and Fourierism had raised human thought to the boiling point, it was the students who boldly enlisted in the ranks of the intellectual rebels, careless of calumny, persecution, and exile.

Although the students of modern Europe number more than a hundred thousand men their influence in the world of ideas is far less than was that of their predecessors. Now-a-days it is by hundreds rather than by thousands that we count the young men of the universities who have thrown their personal interests on the altar of social progress, and who, under various banners, are leading the entry into the promised land. It is even said, and I could not venture to call it a libel, that the majority of our scholarly youth are contented with things as they are, and that their great ambition is to indoctrinate society with conservatism, and surprise their friends with what they call the “moderation” of their views; in this respect they modestly claim to be wiser than their parents, who cannot deny to have in their young days shared the prevailing enthusiasm. A strange

phenomenon is the sight of young men who boast of feeling tired of life, as if the inability to admire, to enjoy, and to be happy were a merit rather than a misfortune!

But it is quite true that in this way die the idle rich. Beyond a doubt our modern university youth, although naturally proud of having passed through the mill of many examinations, would be unable notwithstanding their extravagant pretensions to teach the workmen much in the sphere of study and thought. No, their business is to be pupils, not to give instruction. In great popular movements — such as that of the Commune — the students were very sparsely represented, while workmen supplied in plenty both sinews and brains. Not was the question merely one of work and wages; the interests at stake were those of the whole nation, indeed of all mankind. At the present hour, when a new dispensation is about to be ushered in, when the young knights of reform are preparing for their task, it is not in the avenues of the schools that the questions uppermost in men's minds are discussed most intelligently and with the keenest insight. The graduate is not necessarily the philosopher, nor does a well-stored memory invariably accompany an enlightened understanding. Often the dry-as-dust schoolman is poor in wisdom beside the shrewd man of the world who has gathered here and there the countless facts from which he evolves a wealth of general ideas. Your scientific man may shut himself up in his laboratory as in a prison, and misunderstand the great world without; but the people always form a consistent theory of the universe, be it true or false. But a little while ago, evolution was sneered at by the lecturers of the university, but in the streets and behind the plough, among workmen and peasants, the new truth found a restful home and in eager welcome.

It would be foolish to speak slightly of science. The unearthing of a Babylonian brick, or the observation of a rudimentary flower-stamen, may well make our hearts glad, when the scientist brings the apparently isolated fact into relationship with many others, and shows the value of the discovery. Still more in the realm of ideas should we value the enunciation of a fresh thought, or the arrangement of mental data in their proper importance and relative bearings. In this respect the student, it has often been remarked, blinded by the dust of the library, scarcely perceives that there is a "social question" out of doors, while the workman, on the other hand regards it as the all-important object of study, and finds himself, therefore, far in advance of his bookish brother. This observation is true of other lands than those of the Latin tongues, although in these the intellectual evolution or revolution, if you prefer the word, may have made most progress, far more than in the brigaded schools of Germany or among the young pupils of the American universities. Socialists are numbered by millions east of the Vosges, but in the Fatherland a paltry two or three may group themselves away from the

beer-drinkers, a timorous few among many thousands. At Harvard, the famous American university, boasting 3200 students, reformers are more numerous, but few have yet dared to emancipate themselves from the Christian superstition; at a recent census only two of them were found to declare that they belonged to none of the many sects whose name were given on the schedule. It is in aristocratic England, perhaps, that the human mind enjoys the greatest freedom.

Well, what then are the causes of this conservative moderation among the young, quite out of touch with the spirit of the age? Even the professors observe the phenomenon, but such is the social bondage of modern university life that the evil thing persists with all its baneful consequences. It is generally agreed that from his first day at school the normal life of the child is contrary to nature. What shall be said of an education that arranges favourable conditions for the development of spine disease, that often works permanent injury to the vision, that checks natural desires, that weakens or perverts human instincts? Does it not run counter to the great objects of education as understood by the wise in all ages: strength, grace, beauty? The American Indians and the natives of Australia, as well as the Greeks of old, are unanimous in prescribing an out-of-door life as the best for boys; plenty of athletics and exercise, calculated to develop strong, nimble, healthy men, elastic with life and beaming with vigour. Among ourselves, alas, we often see the youth who is most carefully and expensively nurtured turn out one of the most deplorable specimens of muscular humanity. Medical statistics give us to understand that more than half of the young scholars in the higher academies of continental Europe have ruined their constitutions by self-indulgence, by a life of weariness and monotony; two out of three are weakly youths; and among those who have lost their health there are many who have seriously injured their mental powers, and who, through having whipped and spurred their brains in early life, are compelled to make a sparing use of them in mature age. True, we may cite numerous instances of men who have kept their constitution robust, their limbs agile and strong, their reason bright and serviceable; but these cases are the exceptions, not the rule, they are to be accounted for as due not to the ordinary curriculum of education, but almost always to the privileges of wealthy and well-conditioned adolescence. The young favourites of fortune naturally group themselves in two classes: voluptuaries who exhaust and unfit themselves by debauchery and pessimism, and a few beautiful souls who cherish a high ideal, and endeavour to live up to it.

If the training of the family and of the university educates the child and the young man detrimentally to his many-sided nature, in shutting out from his view both the urban and the rural aspects of life except as seen through loop-holes, if it starves and physically impoverishes him, what does it make of his character? Alas, up to now, our customs have not permitted us to respect the individuality

of the child as that of a future equal, perhaps that of a superior in intellectual and moral attainments. Rare indeed are the parents who see in their son a being whose ideas and disposition have a bent of their own, and seldom to be met with is the teacher who does not try to imbue the minds of his pupils with his opinions, his accepted morality, and who does not endeavour to make his task easy by insisting upon strict obedience.

Afterwards follow the examinations on which depends the future career, and every pupil, every student is then furnished with his text-book as the convict with his chain. The book is the same for all, and for all the programme of study is the same. Henceforth all originality in mental investigation is forbidden, and the burden of the daily commitment to memory takes the place of free thought, and spontaneous inquiry; just as the priest must know by heart his breviary, and the mill of the Thibetan Buddhist turns incessantly, grinding out its perpetual shibboleth *Oum mane padmi houn*. Some at least of these manuals are wonderfully condensed, and contain an extraordinary summary of human knowledge. A thrill of reverence and awe overtakes us in front of these stupendous works, of which each line is its volume, embalming the labour of a long succession of savants. What wealth untold, what unutterable joy really to have mastered the contents of these pregnant folios! We well might regard with envy the blessed examinee who answers with confidence all the questions based upon the text-book. But does he really *know* all these things? Has he learned the reasons why of all the facts? If that were so, we might benevolently pray that he were able to throw back, as did the guests of Vitellias, all the food superfluous to him of that indigestible repast. Let him forget as soon as possible his examination in order to know himself, and to find himself in the domain of free study, on the outlook for unexpected discoveries as the result of independent investigation. But if he has dabbled in all the sciences without having a taste for any he is likely to turn out a mere walking inventory, without enthusiasm, without ambition, professedly capable without preparation for the most difficult undertaking. Supposing again it be true that the testimonials and certificates of professors are not implicitly to be relied upon, that the special favour of masters is often bestowed upon pupils for whom a good word has been spoken by a mutual friend. "Acquit yourselves like men," say the teachers, in view of the distribution of prizes! But do not take that call to energy too seriously. How often, on the contrary, it is to be interpreted as, "Be complaisant, bow low your bead, learn to creep." Besides it, has often been found that men who are great by genius can fall very low through pliability of character. Is it not well known that scientific men are sometimes slow to endorse a new opinion because it is unacceptable in high places: "You are right," say they, "and we would be happy to speak well of you in public, but the Emperor is unwilling."

Certainly, the manner of education is a frightful thing for youths, with its competitions, its examinations, its text-books and all the scientific cram substituted for science: but that is only a small part of the evil. By far the most alarming phase of it must be sought for in the economic organization of society. What is the final purpose towards which all, young and old, are dragged by the current of circumstances? What is the vulgar and commonplace ideal of those who are borne on the crest of the flood? Old Guizot made it known long ago, with his habitual cynicism: Get rich! Get rich!" Now, from the very constitution of society students become aware as a preliminary fact that they will amass money by means of their diplomas. "Science means money" they may well say confidentially among themselves, or even out aloud when they defy the policy of restraint. From their ranks are recruited the ruling classes, which are also the wealthy classes. In the conversation of the family their prospects as professional men are discussed, but without that they are only too well informed, with unmistakable tuition of youth, as to the social position and fortune that their work will bring them. Wiser than their fathers, who were foolishly contaminated by republicanism and romance, they tread with open eyes and self-conscious mind the devious paths that lead to, a brilliant career, to fame and fortune. Only recently the great professor Dubois-Reymond, at the reception of the German emperor on his return from the coronation at Versailles, endeavoured to glorify the German universities as the body-guard of the Hohenzollerns! In the same spirit the army of students, priests, and office-holders might more truthfully boast that they are the body-guard of Capital!

Even in the inner sanctuary of science we may read, these words that Lamartine — pronounced ignoble, "Bought and Sold." Doubtless the formation of society, built upon private property as upon a cornerstone, obliges us to do as others do, the inevitable conditions of success in life, but we should thoroughly understand the shame of our forced proceedings, and determine to make an end of the disgrace, each according to his ability working for the realisation of a new world where the results of common work will belong to all without preliminary bargaining. The higher an act is in the intellectual and moral sphere the more difficult and irksome it is to ask wages for it: here again it is the demoralization of the excellent which become the horrible What is to be thought of, surgeon who holds a man's life at the end of his scalpel and who begins the operation by stretching out his hand for a bit of gold? Is the poet who revels in a new image, or the savant whom a fresh discovery transports with joy, to wait for a list of prices or to study the tradeunion rate of wages before publishing his verses or proclaiming the new truth? At such a computation how many milliards would we be in debt to Bacon and Descartes for the help which they have given to the scientific world? Antiquity has bestowed on us a significant story, that of Archimedes, who while in his bath, and noticing

the degree of immersion of a floater on wood and one oil cork, was suddenly struck as by a lightning flash by the idea of his law regarding the specific weight of bodies. The discovery was made. Did Archimedes think of the money he might ask of the tyrant Hiero as the reward of his genius? He jumped out of the bath, rushed through the streets of Syracuse, and cried to all and sundry, watermen, carters, and navvies, "I have found it, I have found it." The echo of that joyous cry comes down to our own days. The discoveries of science bring with them happiness so exalted that every mean consideration must degrade them. To know lays upon us the obligation to teach. The professional man of to-day learns that he may retail to the highest bidder his second-hand knowledge: the true student, worthy of the name, investigates that he may spread the truth widely.

Furthermore, how could such a man live up to a lofty ideal if he allowed his mind to grow callous by the contemplation of venal interests? The old religious faith that the superstitious still preach to us is disappearing behind us like a fog. It does the best it can in reconciling itself with the spirit of the age in beatifying those whom it formerly burned, in calling itself the friend of evolution, of republicanism, even of socialism. It responds no more to the requirements of mankind; the chain of miracles and of dogmas that it drags behind it delays its advance, and its morality, which is substantially that of resignation, of pessimism tempered by far-off hopes, cannot enter into rivalry with purely human ethics, which inculcates the use and development of our energies in all their fullness. So religion — and I use that word in its noblest sense, meaning love and raputre for a sublime ideal — turns itself away more and more from the region of mystery and of the unknown, to spend itself upon beings of the known world, that is to say, upon humanity. Do you believe that it could exhaust itself there in depth, in intensity, in power of devotion? He who sacrifices himself, without hope of reward, is he inferior to him who macerates his body or devotes himself to charity in order to earn salvation?

Ancient writers have bequeathed to us admirable treatises of ethics and philosophy on the education of the human being, who can find wisdom and at the same time happiness in controlling his passions, in modelling his character, in purifying his thoughts, in reducing to a minimum his needs. Such words on this subject those of Lucretius, Zens, Epictitus, Seneca, even, Horace, are immortal words, which will reverberate from age to age, and which will steadily help to uplift the human ideal, and to raise the worth of the individual. But it is no longer in these times a question of purely personal improvement as in the days of Stoic heroism, it is a business to-day of winning, by education and union, for the whole of society what was formerly claimed by our ancestors for the individual alone. We must study humanity in the constitution of its moral conscience and see that it finds its way towards the bliss before it methodically and with energy, that is

to say, that it reaches the full realisation of its freedom. Is not this stupendous task great enough to employ all our activity, all our affections, all the intellectual and moral power of each one of us?

But this bliss? Shall we ever be able to reach it? Here it is that the social problem confronts us in all its complexity, for to the happy mere food is not sufficient, they need also the free development of their individuality on conditions of equality with other men, without constraint and without servitude. Such is our Anarchist ideal, such is also the ideal (I am sure of it) which is cherished in a manner more or less conscious, by all benevolent people. We are surprised, however, to hear from certain quarters a contrary opinion. Some writers have even been known to declare that such bliss is not a thing to be desired. To these strange idealists war seems a blessing; it comes to rouse our energy, our courage, re-establish character that has become abashed in the soft embraces of peace. Mutual hate between nations, perhaps between classes — such is, if not their ethics, at least their hope.

To those of us who have experienced the abominations of war such an idea seems monstrous; nevertheless by an ingenious exercise of intelligence we may understand the residuum of moral sentiment which is found at the bottom of this paradox. War is a condition of activity, and as such is better, or at least is a less calamity, than a state of flabby inertia; we may recover from it, while absolute inaction leads inevitably to death. Yes, activity is indispensable; every force must be tested before it is applied to a definite work, but should these trials be entered upon at hap-hazard, or ought they not rather to be undertaken in the light of science and by the most approved methods? In this respect the people we call savages, and still more noticeably, the Greeks, the most highly civilised of ancient nations, give us direction. Young men were not admitted to citizenship and were not considered fit to take their place at the head of a family, or to perform the duties prescribed by the state, before they had given indubitable proofs of their dexterity, their strength, their courage, and their powers of endurance. They were not subject to complusion, they were perfectly free to avoid the formidable test, and yet not one took that course, which would have involved his dishonour. The respect for public opinion was too intense that any one should wish to withdraw himself from trials which were to put him in the ranks of men. Among more primitive tribes, again, voluntary heroes, both boys and girls, submitted cheerfully to the most terrible sufferings, to real pangs of torture; they endured hunger and thirst for several days, gave themselves up to the scorching stings of ants, mercilessly flogged each other, underwent fearful mutilations, without a cry, without a murmur. With untroubled features, aye with a smiling face, they presented themselves before their judges: they had given the price of their future.

It is not in this uncivilized fashion that we imagine tests of worth will be applied in, the future to the young on their admission to the life of mature men, but it seems to us in harmony with human nature that in the period of blossoming adolescence, well-developed strength, and love uncalculating, the young can most brilliantly show what stuff they are made of through acts of courage, sacrifice, and devotion. If public opinion only encourage them no deed will appear too difficult for their daring. Let us only appeal to their higher nature and they will all respond. During the American war the young girls of Oberlin College said to the young men: "Go, join the army," and the eleven hundred students went to the war, not one remained. What might we not achieve with these prodigious fountains of strength, sustained by enthusiasm? When the young will no longer have the filthy lucre to corrupt at its very source their ambition of they will move freely towards their ideal, without the disgust of having to despise themselves and to despise their work, when general applause will encourage them to devotedness, what will be the bold enterprise from which they will shrink? Shall we ask them to go to the antarctic pole? They will go. To explore the sea in sub-marine vessels and to draw up a chart of the depths? They will do it. To transform the Sahara into a garden? That will be for them a labour of love. To serve their apprenticeship of travel, exploration, find study? The toil will be absorbed in the pleasure. To spend the years between youth and marriage in the education of children, in the cure of the sick? We shall have millions of male teachers and nurses who will nobly occupy the place of the thousands of soldiers now industriously engaged in whetting their arms for the purpose of killing each other.

Such is the ideal that we propose to youth. In pointing out to it a future of solidarity and altruism we pledge them our word that in that future every trace of pessimism will have disappeared from their minds. "Give yourselves." But "in order to give yourselves, you must belong to yourselves."

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May 21, 2012



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Published by Liberty Press, London, 1895
Retrieved on March 3rd, 2009 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu