

What Can One Do?

1972

This question is frequently asked by people who are concerned about the state of today's world and want to correct it. More often than not, it is asked in a form that indicates the cause of their helplessness: "What can *one person* do?"

I was in the process of preparing this article when I received a letter from a reader who presents the problem (and the error) still more eloquently: "How can an individual propagate your philosophy on a scale large enough to effect the immense changes which must be made in every walk of American life in order to create the kind of ideal country which you picture?"

If this is the way the question is posed, the answer is: he can't. No one can change a country single-handed. So the first question to ask is: why do people approach the problem this way?

Suppose you were a doctor in the midst of an epidemic. You would not ask: "How can one doctor treat millions of patients and restore the whole country to perfect health?" You would know, whether you were alone or part of an organized medical campaign, that you have to treat as many people as you can reach, according to the best of your ability, and that nothing else is possible.

It is a remnant of mystic philosophy—specifically, of the mind-body split—that makes people approach intellectual issues in a manner they would not use to deal with physical problems?

They would not seek to stop an epidemic overnight, or to build a skyscraper single-handed. Nor would they refrain from renovating their own crumbling house, on the grounds that they are unable to rebuild the entire city. But in the realm of man's consciousness, the realm of ideas, they still tend to regard knowledge as irrelevant, and they expect to perform instantaneous miracles, somehow—or they paralyze themselves by projecting an impossible goal.

(The reader whose letter I quoted was doing the right things, but felt that some wider scale of action was required. Many others merely ask the question, but do nothing.)

If you are seriously interested in fighting for a better world, begin by identifying the nature of the problem. The battle is primarily intellectual (philosophical), not political. Politics is the last consequence, the practical implementation, of the fundamental (metaphysical-epistemological-ethical) ideas that dominate a given nation's culture. You cannot fight or change the consequences without fighting and changing the cause; nor can you attempt any practical implementation without knowing what you want to implement.

In an intellectual battle, you do not need to convert everyone. History is made by minorities—or, more precisely, history is made by intellectual movements, which are created by minorities. Who belongs to these minorities? Anyone who is able and willing actively to concern himself with intellectual issues. Here, it is not quantity, but *quality*, that counts (the quality—and consistency—of the ideas one is advocating).

An intellectual movement does not start with organized action. Whom would one organize? A philosophical battle is a battle for men's minds, not an attempt to enlist blind followers. Ideas can be propagated only by men who understand them. An organized movement has to be preceded by an educational campaign, which requires trained—self-trained—teachers (self-trained in the sense that a philosopher can offer you the material of knowledge, but it is your own mind that has to absorb it). Such training is the first requirement for being a doctor during an ideological epidemic—and the precondition of any attempt to “change the world.”

“The immense changes which must be made in every walk of American life” cannot be made singly, piecemeal or “retail,” so to speak; an army of crusaders would not be enough to do it. But the factor that underlies and determines every aspect of human life is philosophy; teach men the right philosophy—and their

own minds will do the rest. Philosophy is the wholesaler in human affairs.

Man cannot exist without some form of philosophy, i.e., some comprehensive view of life. Most men are not intellectual innovators, but they are receptive to ideas, are able to judge them critically and to choose the right course, when and if it is offered. There are also a great many men who are indifferent to ideas and to anything beyond the concrete-bound range of the immediate moment; such men accept subconsciously whatever is offered by the culture of their time, and swing blindly with any chance current. They are merely social ballast—be they day laborers or company presidents—and, by their own choice, irrelevant to the fate of the world.

Today, most people are acutely aware of our cultural-ideological vacuum; they are anxious, confused, and groping for answers. Are you able to enlighten them?

Can you answer their questions? Can you offer them a consistent case? Do you know how to correct their errors? Are you immune from the fallout of the constant barrage aimed at the destruction of reason—and can you provide others with antimissile missiles? A political battle is merely a skirmish fought with muskets; a philosophical battle is a nuclear war.

If you want to influence a country's intellectual trend, the first step is to bring order to your own ideas and integrate them into a consistent case, to the best of your knowledge and ability. This does not mean memorizing and reciting slogans and principles, Objectivist or otherwise: knowledge necessarily includes the ability to apply abstract principles to concrete problems, to recognize the principles in specific issues, to demonstrate them, and to advocate a consistent course of action. This does not require omniscience or omnipotence; it is the subconscious expectation of automatic omniscience in oneself and in others that defeats many would-be crusaders (and serves as an excuse for doing nothing). What is required is honesty—intellectual honesty, which consists in knowing what one does know, constantly expanding one's knowledge, and *never* evading or failing to correct a contradiction. This means: the development of an active mind as a permanent attribute.

When or if your convictions are in your conscious, orderly control, you will be able to communicate them to others. This does not mean that you must make philosophical speeches when unnecessary and inappropriate. You need philosophy to back you

up and give you a consistent case when you deal with or discuss specific issues.

If you like condensations (provided you bear in mind their full meaning), I will say: when you ask "What can one do?"—the answer is "SPEAK" (provided you know what you are saying).

A few suggestions: do not wait for a national audience. Speak on any scale open to you, ~~large or small—to your~~ friends, your associates, your professional organizations, or any legitimate public forum. You can never tell when your words will reach the right mind at the right time. You will see no immediate results—but it is of such activities that public opinion is made.

Do not pass up a chance to express your views on important issues. Write letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines, to TV and radio commentators and, above all, to your Congressman (who depend on their constituents). If your letters are brief and rational (rather than incoherently emotional), they will have more influence than you suspect.

The opportunities to speak are all around you. I suggest that you make the following experiment: take an ideological "inventory" of one week, i.e., note how many times people utter the wrong political, social and *moral* notions as if these were self-evident truths, with *your* silent sanction. Then make it a habit to object to such remarks—no, not to make lengthy speeches, which are seldom appropriate, but merely to say: "I don't agree." (And be prepared to explain why, if the speaker wants to know.) This is one of the best ways to stop the spread of vicious bromides. (If the speaker is innocent it will help him: if he is not, it will undercut his confidence the next time.) Most particularly, do not keep silent when your own ideas and values are being attacked.

Do not "proselytize" indiscriminately, i.e., do not force discussions or arguments on those who are not interested or not willing to argue. It is not your job to save everyone's soul. If you do the things that are in your power, you will not feel guilty about not doing—"somehow"—the things that are not.

Above all, do not join the wrong *ideological* groups or movements, in order to "do something." By "ideological" (in this context), I mean groups or movements proclaiming some vaguely generalized, undefined (and, usually, contradictory) *political* goals. (E.g., the Conservative Party, which subordinates reason to faith, and substitutes theocracy for capitalism; or the "libertarian" hippies, who subordinate reason to whims, and

substitute anarchism for capitalism.) To join such groups means to reverse the philosophical hierarchy and to sell out fundamental principles for the sake of some superficial political action which is bound to fail. It means that you help the defeat of your ideas and the victory of your enemies. (For a discussion of the reasons, see "The Anatomy of Compromise" in my book *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*.)

The only groups one may properly join today are *ad hoc* committees, i.e., groups organized to achieve a single, specific, clearly defined goal, on which men of differing views can agree. In such cases, no one may attempt to ascribe *his* views to the entire membership, or to use the group to serve some hidden ideological purpose (and *this* has to be watched very, very vigilantly).

I am omitting the most important contribution to an intellectual movement—writing—because this discussion is addressed to men of every profession. Books, essays, articles are a movement's permanent fuel, but it is worse than futile to attempt to become a writer solely for the sake of a "cause." Writing, like any other work, is a profession and must be approached as such.

It is a mistake to think that an intellectual movement requires some special duty or self-sacrificial effort on your part. It requires something much more difficult: a profound conviction that ideas are important to you and to your own life. If you integrate that conviction to every aspect of your life, you will find many opportunities to enlighten others.

The reader whose letter I quoted, indicates the proper pattern of action: "As a teacher of astronomy, for several years, I have been actively engaged in demonstrating the power of reason and the absolutism of reality to my students . . . I have also made an effort to introduce your works to my associates, following their reading with discussion when possible; and have made it a point to insist on the use of reason in all of my personal dealings."

These are some of the right things to do, as often and as widely as possible.

But that reader's question implied a search for some shortcut in the form of an organized movement. No shortcut is possible.

It is too late for a movement of people who hold a conventional mixture of contradictory philosophical notions. It is too early for a movement of people dedicated to a philosophy of reason. But it is never too late or too early to propagate the right ideas—except under a dictatorship.

If a dictatorship ever comes to this country, it will be by the

default of those who keep silent. We are still free enough to speak. Do we have time? No one can tell. But time is on our side—because we have an indestructible weapon and an invincible ally (if we learn how to use them): reason and reality.

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