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Comment

John Ely Briggs

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Comment by the Editor

TO KNOW OR TO BE?

During the last three hundred years — since white settlement in America began — the world has made tremendous progress in science, letters, art, industry and trade. The normal effects of time and space have been destroyed by marvelous inventions. Food, clothing, and shelter can be produced in enormous quantities at a nominal cost. Literacy has spread to the farthest countries. Diseases of body and mind can be cured. Millions of people find the world a more comfortable place than their ancestors did.

Nevertheless, misery has not been abated. While some folks have prospered, others have been plunged into the depths of poverty. Speed has shattered human nerves, the difference between cost and price has steadily increased, knowledge has outrun comprehension, and the machinery that saves the sweat of human toil has robbed the workman of his right to work. Poverty is not merely the lack of wealth: it is also the absence of morality, health, culture, or anything else that contributes to general happiness. Horse thieves are as poor in ethics as paupers are financially bankrupt; and the presence of the one is a social responsibility no less than the other.

This is the enigma of civilization. Are progress and poverty inevitably concomitant conditions of the same process? In the midst of plenty, must people starve? If there is a better way, the solution must be sought in universal education. But what shall the method be? Is the deficiency in knowledge or in culture?

Practical men of affairs have believed that general welfare would be promoted most by teaching people how to earn a living. "Youth", said William Penn, should be trained "in useful knowledge and arts". It would be better to cultivate their mechanical and physical ability, which "would be of exceeding use to them through the whole course of their life", he thought, than to "puzzle, strain, and load them" with "a strange tongue or two, that it is ten to one may never be useful to them". Theodore Roosevelt declared that "we should educate men and women toward and not away from what is to be their life-work — toward the home, toward the farm, toward the shop". If people were skilled in vocations they would be more likely to find congenial employment, and thus escape penury. Knowledge is therefore essential, and utility is the test of educational achievement.

Other wise men, like Samuel L. Howe, have maintained that living is far more important than the means of securing a livelihood. Let youth be prepared for the good life, and happiness will be the inevitable consequence whatever their station may be. Since no one

is ever too old to learn, information may be obtained whenever it is needed, but mental and moral refinement neglected in youth can seldom be acquired later. According to this conception of general well-being, culture is essential and character is the test of educational achievement. A man may be rich without money.

Which scheme is best? Neither has yet solved the riddle of progress and poverty. Is the answer to be found in general knowledge or in personal character? To know, or to be — which?

J. E. B.