The Responsibilities of Citizenship in a Democracy

The Predicament of Democratic Man by Edmond Cahn. Macmillan. $3.95.

by Thomas J. O'Toole

Expanding into the general area of politics some of the insights he first expressed in The Moral Decision (Indiana University Press, 1955), Edmond Cahn has written a prolegomenon to the ethics of democracy. The tradition in which he writes is as ancient as Plato and Aristotle, but few contemporary writers have addressed themselves to the responsibilities of modern citizenship. The literature on human rights grows apace; that on individual obligations in society is largely stagnant. Themes suggested by Lord Lindsay and by Hallowell are closer to Cahn's new books than are any other secular works, but the quasi-political writings of such men as Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray, stemming from religious concerns, are closest to problems explored by this secular philosopher of justice.

At the outset Cahn raises the moral dilemma of the citizen in a democratic state, who obviously shares responsibility for the acts of a government which he in some measure controls, and yet whose power of control is so attenuated as to raise doubt concerning the extent of his moral responsibility. What, for example, is the moral guilt of the citizen when the state executes an innocent defendant?

To approach an answer to such questions, Cahn suggests that we must adopt a "consumer approach" toward government. We "consume" government by using its services and by being involved in its processes (as by being a party to a lawsuit). But in a democratic government we also "consume" government and law actively, by shaping policy, voting, asserting group interest, and, most importantly, by examining, judging, and assuming responsibility for what our officials do in our name. We have a moral obligation to engage in these processes of civic responsibility: prevention of injustice, reparation for it when it has occurred, and protest against it. The individual citizen must conscientiously strive to move the community through these processes.

It is Cahn's thesis that the citizen in a democracy can remain free of responsibility for collective wrong if he can avoid inciting wrong, authorizing it, accepting its benefits, recklessly putting dangerous officials in office, remaining silent in the face of wrong, suppressing the truth about wrongs, or creating susceptible victims who could be exposed to wrongs. He proposes a self-search, an examination of conscience in this inner-chamber of civic moral responsibility.

It should be obvious that the author falls far short of imposing full personal responsibility upon each citizen for the actions of a democratic government. Instead, he eases the sense of guilt in a general way, while sharpening the sense of obligation in several important particulars centering around the obligation to protest injustice. Public wrong contaminates only the principals and the accessories, but one can become an accessory by passive acceptance.

Turning to a contrapuntal theme, Cahn explores the incentives democratic society offers to its citizens. The first of these is equality, in the Jeffersonian sense of a political postulate rather than an existential reality. Yet this equality is an active one, with open access to opportunities and advancements in society. Democratic equality is not an emphasis which need detract from liberty, but is merely one of liberty's modes.

Democracy also encourages certain virtuous qualities, especially judgment, honor, and associability. By judgment Cahn means not only intelligent choice, but also an independence in individual thinking. Exploiting one of his favorite themes, he argues that "due process" must be used in forming opinions on public issues. Indeed, through due process a tempered judgment is formed. As in the court-room, so in the mind of each citizen, due process requires conscious standards of judgment, a careful inquiry into facts, a willingness to weigh contradictory evidence, an attitude of impartiality, and a review and (if necessary) correction of earlier judgments.

The quality of honor requires that citizens be willing to make sacrifices when necessary to retain the integrity of their beliefs. In our society the ultimate sacrifice of life is not called for, as it was of Socrates, but official injustice can sometimes be prevented only by the willingness of men to expose themselves to lesser sacrifices.

The peculiarly democratic virtue examined by Cahn is called associability. This is the quality by which a person cooperates with others in common endeavors. It creates a certain tension between individuality and group conformity, but this relationship can be constructive for both the person and the group.

Underlying all of Cahn's writing is his own view of how moral judgments are formed. Although he likes to use the machinery of law as a model and the language

Mr. O'Toole is Vice Dean and professor of law at Villanova University Law School.
of law as his verbal formula, he posits a comprehensive and essentially pragmatic concept of morality, founded upon a secular humanism. Morality is taught to man by society, and the lesson is enforced by legal and social sanctions. But what man thus acquires is reworked according to his own intellect and temperament into a rule of self-conduct. In the face of specific moral controversies each man relegislates the moral command and applies it to a particular case. In so doing he exercises an influence on the total moral scene and thus weakens or strengthens the total order.

The conclusion which must emerge from this dialectic is that the making of particular moral decisions is what ultimately counts in the moral process. Anxious to avoid an identification between morals and mores, Cahn warns that to follow mores is merely to conform; to test the mores in our own consciences is to assert moral responsibility.

For all the incidental pleasure and mental stimulation it offers, Cahn's work remains essentially unsatisfying. The sense of injustice which he seeks to encourage in the human breast stems from judgments composed of a curious mixture of pure reason, instinct, sentimentality, and plain utilitarianism. The moral insights which he purports to find in legal decisions reflect chiefly his private moral opinions clothed in the rhetoric of the law. Sometimes he poses a moral absolute (such as respect for innocent life) to set limits to his own blend of pragmatism and personalism, much as the magician pulls the bunny out of the hat after an extensive exercise in magic. Not infrequently he succeeds in imposing some of his own policy preferences under the guise of moral imperatives. This is accomplished by ignoring the countervailing civic values (particularly the collective concern over order and security in society) which necessarily temper our choice of programs reflecting individual interests.

But what endures in his work is a strong call to moral responsibility, however poorly he may chart the path. In a democratic society the collective acts of the citizenry must be founded upon a respect for freedom and a thirst for justice. Cahn affirms that the moral citizen must be neither cynical toward nor indifferent to the actions of his government.

Edmond Cahn on "The Democratic Temper"

For there is a certain kind of sentiment or temper that can be associated specifically with democracy. Since no one feels like a democrat every moment of the day, we all slip in and out of the temper. We cast it aside whenever we feel disillusioned and cynical, since it is neither of these, or when we feel mystically exalted or truculently arrogant or humbly servile and abased, since it is certainly none of these. Nor is the democratic temper a mere undifferentiated feeling of patriotism, for there have always been innumerable excellent patriots in countries under autocratic rule. Patriotism, pathetically enough, can be found almost anywhere.

What then is the specifically democratic temper? It is a firm respect for oneself displayed as a sort of briny irreverence toward officials. Democratic irreverence does not ordinarily imply rebellion or even disrespect; its eye-level gaze implies only that the citizen sees the official for what he is, i.e., just another person performing a socially assigned task with more or less competence and ability.

In this relation, the citizen's attitude of irreverence is not truly democratic unless it is actuated by some modicum of respect for his own dignity, character and judgment. If he happens to believe that all men, including himself and the official he is confronting, are hopelessly sinful, corrupt, stupid, or constrained by deterministic forces, then his temper will be irreverent but not democratic. If he feels that all the governed are worthless and all the governors wise and good, or vice versa, he will likewise lack the democratic temper. For the temper is the emotional equivalent of a bold and audacious assertion. Through affective manner, emotional pitch, and tone of expression, it asserts that democracy has canceled and obliterated the old line of separation between governments and peoples, that democratic citizens are really operative units and elements within the government, that they are among the number of the governors at the same time that they are among the governed, and that the only acceptable distinction between an official and a general citizen is that the official's governmental powers, functions, and duties are more narrowly defined and specialized. In short, the participative citizen in a democracy may feel that he too holds an office—in Aristotle's radiant phrase, an "indefinite office." (The Predicament of Democratic Man)
The Arab World Today
Morroe Berg, Doubleday. 460 pp. $5.95.
An American sociologist presents a multi-dimensional picture of tradition and change in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt. The influence of the Islamic religion on present-day Near Eastern affairs and the growth of Arab "neutralism" are given notable treatment.

A Foreign Policy for American Business
Thomas Aitken, Jr, Harper. 159 pp. $4.
The responsibilities of American businessmen abroad extend far beyond the duty "just to do business," writes the author, who brings his own experiences to bear on problems of better coordinating foreign investment with foreign relations.

The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations
Barbara Ward, Norton. 159 pp. $3.75.
Personal and national egalitarianism, material progress, rising birth rates, and scientific change constitute a revolution now accelerating in the underdeveloped countries, in the view of this noted economist. Miss Ward devotes her latest book to an analysis of this four-fold challenge and suggests ways in which the West may meet it.

Communism: Threat to Freedom
John F. Cronin, S.S. National Catholic Welfare Conference. 80 pp. $0.50 cents.
The first two chapters of this study focus on Communism as a geopolitical force and as an internal menace, while the third discusses tactics of the free world's anti-Communist struggle. Study-club outlines and reading lists are provided.

A Preface to Politics
Walter Lippmann, University of Michigan Press. 238 pp. $2.25.
Originally published in 1914, this volume is an early formulation of Lippmann's conception of twentieth-century politics, a central tenet of which is—as he then expressed it—that "that government is best which provides most."

Six Crises
Richard M. Nixon, Doubleday. 460 pp. $5.95.
With absorbing candor, the former Vice President reviews six significant events of his career—the Hiss Case, the "Nixon Fund" television speech, President Eisenhower's heart attack, the Korean riots, the "kitchen debate" with Khrushchev, and the campaign of 1960.

CONTENTS

Editorial Comment .................................................... 1
In the Magazines ..................................................... 2
The Decline of Diplomacy ........................................... 3
Josef Korbel
Other Voices ............................................................ 8
BOOKS
The Responsibilities of Citizenship ............................. 10
Thomas J. O'Toole
Current Reading ....................................................... 12

Opinions expressed in WORLDVIEW are those of the authors, and not necessarily of the Council on Religion and International Affairs.