

THE UNITED STATES AND CIVILIZATION

By

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The University of Chicago



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO · ILLINOIS

CHARLES R. WALGREEN
FOUNDATION LECTURES

THE UNITED STATES AND
CIVILIZATION

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS · CHICAGO
THE BAKER & TAYLOR COMPANY, NEW YORK
THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, LONDON

To

ROBERT MAYNARD HUTCHINS

“ . . . so must I nedes confesse and graunt that many thinges be in the Utopian weale publique, whiche in our cities I maye rather wishe for, then hope after.”

—THOMAS MORE

FOREWORD



LECTURES given at the University of Chicago under the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation for the Study of American Institutions are designed to assist students toward an understanding of contemporary life in the United States—its background in history, its ideals, values, and institutions, its present needs and possible future. To foster an intelligent citizenship and patriotism, not narrowly nationalistic in their expression, and with thought and knowledge much more than emotion as their foundation, is a principal purpose of this Foundation.

During the university year, 1940–41, "What Is Democracy?" "Democracy in American Life: a Historical View," "Democracy and National Unity," "Education in a Democracy," "The United States and Civilization," and "Basic Documents of Our Republic" were the several titles of the six series of lectures offered under the sponsorship of the Walgreen Foundation. As groups of addresses they were prepared for delivery to audiences of students. In their published form they represent an effort of the Walgreen Foundation to extend its usefulness beyond the limits of the University of Chicago campus.

Without the gracious co-operation of the authors and the University of Chicago Press, this effort could not have been made. The road through the Press was much the smoother because of the kindly help given at all times by Miss Mary D. Alexander and Miss Mary Irwin.

WILLIAM T. HUTCHINSON

*Executive Secretary, Charles R. Walgreen Foundation
for the Study of American Institutions*

PREFACE



SOME students at a neighboring college recently invited me to speak to them. Uncertain as to what kind of subject would be appropriate for the occasion, I appealed for advice, through a friend, to one of their professors whom I had met. This was the substance of his reply: In company with many other members of the "lost generation," I obviously felt, he said, that much was wrong with the kind of education we had had and with the civilization of which we found ourselves a part. Two world-wars within three decades had done nothing to dispel our doubts. He suggested that I explain what is wrong, why it is wrong, and what can be done about it!

Those are the questions with which my essay is concerned. I need scarcely say that it makes no pretense at supplying either comprehensive or sufficient answers! I release it for publication with many misgivings, which arise from a deep sense of my inadequate endowment and training. But my essay is not the product of a hasty impulse. It was written before the professor asked me his questions. The argument and structure of Part I took form in my mind at least as early as 1934. I have made use of notes that I began collecting, in odd moments, in 1919 and 1920, when I spent my Junior and Senior years at Harvard following the Armistice. Such inadequate qualifications as I have for my task are a love of art (which I owe to my mother, my father, and my wife) and a study that I have been making of industrial history in relation to the history of civili-

zation since the Renaissance. The present book is in the nature of an epilogue to that study—far the greater part of which remains to be completed, though I have in manuscript sketches for the whole of it. Epilogues should not be printed in advance of the work they conclude, and my excuse for publishing this one is the uncertainty of the times and the apparent relevancy to the issues that confront the United States today of the lessons which history has taught me. They are issues that need to be faced without delay. If, as I scarcely dare to hope, my essay should find a few readers and encourage them to face these issues, its purpose would be attained.

My historical work has kept me rather continually occupied during the past twenty years, so that I have had little opportunity to turn aside from it. Although I published articles on subjects treated in this book as early as 1939, it would not have appeared as soon as it has if Mr. Emery T. Filbey had not done me the honor of asking me to lecture under the auspices of the Walgreen Foundation in the spring of 1941.

My essay might never have been written at all but for the generous and constant encouragement I have received from the distinguished American to whom it is dedicated. Thanks to him, it is at the University of Chicago alone that the important problems with which I have attempted to deal have been seriously and continually raised during the last decade. The essay itself has benefited in many ways, as will be apparent, from his written works and from his speeches. It has been greatly improved, in ways that will be less apparent, by the frequent advice and help that he has given me at various stages of composition. I need hardly add that, like the other friends who have kindly assisted me, he is in no way responsible for the conclusions or the nature of the argument.

My wife has helped me in all manner of ways. My book treats, from a somewhat different point of view, several sub-

jects she has dealt with in a book which she had in hand long before I began this one, and which should soon be published. Suffice it to say that I am indebted to her, not she to me, for the resemblances.

Professor Frank H. Knight has read through the whole essay, either in typescript or in proof, with a care for my interests that I would describe as Christian were I not afraid of offending him. It will be understood that he is in no way implicated in the result by the fact that his criticisms and suggestions have helped me to improve the work considerably. Professor Yves R. Simon has done much for Part II. Professor Quincy Wright and Mr. James Dingwall, both of whom kindly read through an earlier version of the book, when it was in the form of lectures, made several useful suggestions.

I have derived help and encouragement from a number of friends and scholars who have not read the book. My obligations to Professor R. H. Tawney and Professor Jacques Maritain will be obvious. Both of them have gone out of their way to help me. Others whom I should like to thank also are Professor E. A. Duddy, Professor A. L. Dunham, Dr. Earl Harlan, Miss Stella Lange, the late Professor Marcel Moya of the University of Montpellier, Professor Robert E. Park, Dr. Artur Schnabel, Mr. Harrington Shortall, and Rev. Von Ogden Vogt. Parts of several chapters have appeared, in a somewhat different form, in the *Review of Politics*, and I am under special obligations to its editor, Dr. Waldemar Gurian. Parts of two chapters were published in 1939 in the *General Magazine and Historical Chronicle* and the *University of Chicago Magazine*.

I am very grateful to the Walgreen Foundation for putting at my disposal the resources necessary to see the book through the press. My relations with the Foundation were made especially pleasant by the thoughtfulness of its secretary, Professor William T. Hutchinson. The staff of the University of Chicago

Press have provided me with technical assistance in connection with the typescript and proofs which only a person who has published books elsewhere can adequately appreciate. I am indebted to Mrs. Margaret DeVinney for her careful typing, and to Dean Robert Redfield and Miss Diane Greeter for putting her services at my disposal. The Index is largely the work of Mr. George Batruel.

November 19, 1941

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PUBLISHED JANUARY 1942. SECOND IMPRESSION MARCH 1943. COMPOSED AND
PRINTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, U.S.A.

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I

INTRODUCTION



HISTORY can teach what has been. It cannot teach what ought to be. It cannot even settle what is possible. For any conception of what ought to be we have to turn to moral philosophy, the science of the good. That is a venerable subject. Like most of man's works which have stood the test of time, it is regarded by those of our contemporaries who recognize its existence—and they are not the majority—with curiosity or amusement or distaste. What seldom, if ever, occurs to them is that the subject of moral philosophy, as expounded by the wisest philosophers of the past, can help them toward a solution of the grave problems they face today as individuals and as members of communities and nations.

On the rare occasions when it is suggested that the study of what is good for man and for mankind is relevant to modern scholarship and modern statesmanship, the suggestion, if it reaches a wide audience, arouses such storms of hasty opposition and suspicion in the American schools, colleges, and universities that all trace of its original meaning has been blown out of it by the time the winds of public and scholastic opinion have died down. It is hardly possible for anyone in the United States today to suggest that Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, or Aquinas might to advantage influence the conduct or even the thought of our time, without being called a medievalist, out of touch with modern conditions. If persons treat the wisdom

of these ancient philosophers as superior to most current opinion on matters of learning, art, politics, or private conduct, they are suspected of wishing to see all the American institutions of higher learning converted into medieval universities, if not into medieval monasteries and nunneries. They are suspected of wanting to scrap all our industrial machinery and return to the relatively simple economic relationships of the thirteenth century or even the Dark Ages. Their critics see a priest lurking behind every desk in their lecture-rooms.

These nightmares arise in part from the mistaken assumption that moral philosophy is an alternative to the historical, sociological, and anthropological studies¹ of man and of ideas with which university men have been concerned in recent decades. It is assumed that we must either return to the great ancient and medieval philosophers and forget all the analytical studies of the past century and a half or, as is the common practice in the United States at present, regard the works of those philosophers, together with yesterday's analytical studies, as irrelevant to contemporary inquiry, and focus all the attention of scholars on new analytical studies of the immediate, and occasionally of the ancient, past. The believers in the importance of past knowledge and wisdom for the struggle with present-day problems have not always helped as much as they might to dispel the nightmares.

We need a firm grasp of the knowledge and wisdom bequeathed us by ancient sages—not to destroy the work of serious and impartial modern students of society, but to make this work valuable to mankind. It is only with the help of moral philosophy that we can detect the ores of general truth which such studies contain. It is only with the help of moral philosophy that we can distinguish which aspects of these studies are important and which are unimportant. Far from

¹ We include under these heads the analytical studies of economists and political scientists.

being alternatives, moral philosophy and history, at their best, are complementary. Moral philosophy shows us both the limitations of historical research and its uses. Recent historical investigations, carried on by "social scientists" and by students of the so-called "humanities," have provided vast mines of information concerning the economic, the political, the religious, the intellectual, and the cultural conditions of different peoples, different nations, and different civilizations. The moral philosopher can use this buried treasure to compose a more concrete picture of the nature of good ends than was possible for Aristotle or St. Thomas Aquinas, with their more meager materials.

By drawing on the knowledge and wisdom of the moral philosopher, a few historians, together with some other students of society, can escape being smothered by the materials which now envelop them. What is lacking today in history, as in poetry and literature generally, is a hierarchy of moral and aesthetic values such as might be derived from philosophy. Such a hierarchy is hardly less indispensable for the writing of great history than for the writing of great literature.

Moral philosophy is a more exalted study than history, in the sense that it is concerned with the whole universe and that it seeks to cultivate the best in man. This does not mean that it diminishes the stature of history. To distinguish is not to diminish. On the contrary, moral philosophy contributes to the dignity and the significance of history, just as the true cultivation of history contributes to the force of moral philosophy. Unlike the quest for private riches, the quest for the true and the just is not a competitive game. If the wise man were asked, "Which is the greater, moral philosophy or history?" his answer would properly be the same that Goethe is said to have given the Philistine who tried to trap him by inquiring, "Who is the greater artist, you or Schiller?" Goethe's reply was, "You had better be glad you have us both."