A Philosophy of Life for the American Farmer (and Others)

by William Ernest Hocking

"FOR THE MAN who cannot act for himself," says the author, "philosophy is a luxury; for a free man it is a necessity"—because philosophy is concerned with values, with the things that make life worth while, and the free man has to make his own choice among these things. This distinguished philosopher, who runs a farm of his own, here outlines the kind of philosophy that grows out of farm life as he sees it. He deals with fundamental attitudes toward family life, the ownership of property, the urbanization of the country, the industrialization of farming, absentee ownership, capitalism, democracy, as well as with what he calls "the wider horizon" of literature, drama, the arts, the sciences. "The most dangerous feature of contemporary life," he concludes, "is not its transition but the fact that in the course of change our capacity for serious thought has so far diminished." There is "an absence of depth, a fear lest meditation should show the emptiness of the affair we call life. Philosophy is the business of taking stock, at least once; it is the passage to manhood." It should be especially the right of the farmer, who stands near the earth.

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ONE THING that distinguishes man from the animals is his imagination. Animals, so far as we know, make no plans for tomorrow, still less for a year ahead; imagination presents them no picture of an improved condition. Many an animal, like the squirrel, hoards for the winter; but the probability is that this is done from instinct rather than from foresight—since the squirrel, like the bee, will keep on hoarding after all need for it is past. Man, on the contrary, is always planning; he lives in his dreams unless his hopes are dashed by repeated failure or unless circumstances compel him to believe that planning for himself is useless.

In a social order built on the authority of upper levels over lower levels, imagination has little to do in this direction; for the majority, their planning is done for them. In the authoritarian states arising in central Europe, the state plans as much as possible for its citizens, the place of personal planning is by so much restricted, and imagination has accordingly little to do. In a democratic state, men are encouraged to think not alone for themselves, but for the state also (often, it must be admitted, beyond their capacity). In the United States, while we are asked to think for the state, the striking trait of our social life has been the scope offered to individuals to imagine and plan for themselves. It has been assumed that human individuals know what they want and can be trusted to find ways and means to realize it, if they have opportunity. The opportunities have been present in the great domain and the rapid social growth; our Constitution has provided the freedom for individual enterprise; the rest has been left to our own energy and wisdom. The energy has not been lacking; has the wisdom been as great? Have we known the kind of life most worth living?

As a Nation of free people, we have done well. But we have also made our mistakes, and as time goes on the business of steering our own living seems to become more difficult rather than less so. Changes have come faster than we could adjust ourselves to them. We have thought we knew what we wanted; but we have not always known what we wanted most; we have lacked a scale of values. We have been wobbly in our principles—by the way, what are our principles? We have, in short, been in need of a philosophy. For a man who cannot act for himself, philosophy is a luxury; for a free man, it is a necessity.

THE NATURAL PROGRAM OF LIFE

What makes a human life worth living? To a certain extent, nature takes care of this matter. There is no need for a theory to tell the boy during the years when he is burning to grow up to man's powers and estate, that he wants the command of his own capacities. There is no need to instruct him later on that he wants to make a living, and to find friends; still later, to find a mate, to beget children, care for them, educate them; then to have a standing in the community which he can give to his family as well as enjoy for himself; then to rest a bit and take his ease before he leaves the scene. This is what we might call the natural program of life. If these are the fundamental satisfactions of life, we have to say that in our part of the planet, where famines and wars have played
comparatively little havoc, most men achieve something of them.

It is no disparagement of this program to say that, except for that item which we called standing in the community, most of it is had in common by man and the animals. The writer is not prepared to say that even in some animal societies there is not such a thing as a "standing in the community"—the swagger cock and the champion buck seem to have something of the sort; but in any case, it has no such importance or meaning as with the human being. The other items—growing up, food getting, mating, bringing up the young, exerting one's powers and sometimes displaying them with a certain pride—all of these have deep roots in the animal kingdom.

It is a help to self-understanding to compare human life and animal life on these matters, both for the great likenesses and also for the great differences between them.

The principle of evolution dwells on the literal kinship between man and the lower animals. In the early days of this theory, much of the hostility to it was due to a subtle injury to our pride in the confession of relationship. But we have learned that likeness, however profound, does not abolish difference. And in the practical management of animals, the farmer is in a peculiar position of advantage to appreciate both the likeness and the difference. He knows the natural control which the superior being can always establish; and he knows as well the mutual trust and kindness which can be established across the great barrier. There are few men who do not feel subtly flattered when they can win the confidence of a shy or skittish beast. Man can understand the animal; the animal can but dimly understand man, for the peculiar values of human living pass him completely by.

What are those peculiar values?

**THE HUMAN VALUES**

The peculiar human values arise from the fact that in the human being the instinctive drives are balanced, giving the human mind a chance to survey the whole scene as the animal mind does not.

For example, in the animal there is no physical self-consciousness and no shame, and hence no inhibition about carrying out any physical function at any time. In man, all the physical functions are held in conscious check and governed by a sense of fitness or privacy. In the animal there are three drives which are more or less sporadic, but which are intense and lead to conflict—food getting, acquisition, sex. No society could grow strong unless there were some restraint to the angry expressions of competition for food or property or the sex mate. In the human being all these impulses are balanced by counterimpulses or hesitations; even in respect to eating, when other interests are in the saddle the idea of eating is likely to be slightly displeasing. None of these drives can become so insistent that the man has to yield to them unless he encourages them to become insistent. And then, combativeness itself has a counterimpulse which checks the attack. The result is that man is capable of hesitation as the animal is not; and hesitation gives thought a chance. It allows, and even compels, the question: Which way do I really prefer?
Thus man, by his natural balance, is fated to look at the whole of things. It is only the human being who can form the conception of the whole of life, plans and prepares for death, and considers that there are things he would like to get accomplished in this limited time.

Together with this remarkable balance of instincts there goes another peculiarity of human nature, its unity.

The various drives that affect the animal—hunger, curiosity, fear, anger, love—take their turns; one excludes the other. The unity of the animal consists in the fact that there is a time for each of these activities, and as a rule no two try to take the field at the same moment. A hungry beast whose prey is in an exposed place may be torn between fear and his famished stomach; but the general rule of his life is, one impulse after another. In man, competition of various impulses is the rule rather than the exception; he has choices and decisions to make every hour of the day. This would be a racking business were it not that there is for man a dominating interest which takes the shape of a "purpose"; and this purpose sheds off all the irrelevant suggestions without effort. When the day's work is on, play, quarreling, love making, and food taking are simply shunted; they get no hearing.

More than this, the dominating interest substitutes for the rest. All primitive interests may be said to be forms of one deeper interest, the will to live, or the will to power. Thus curiosity gets its force (partly) from the fact that knowledge is power; the interest in work and workmanship comes (in part) from the enjoyment of power over the materials at hand, and indirectly from the prestige or social power which skill commands. A man wants chiefly to count for something, not to be a cipher in the world; and if this fundamental interest can be satisfied in the direction of his purpose, the more specific drives can be relatively neglected. Thus the human being can make out a satisfactory life if he has one region of effectiveness, one outlet for his "will to power," and no man who is ineffectual can be happy no matter how much he possesses.

To put it in a nutshell, an animal (since he has no purpose) is satisfied if he lives through the usual round of momentary activities and successes; a man can be satisfied only if he can create. He may be satisfied with a minimum of instinctive success, provided he can accomplish a purpose, that is, can leave an effect in the world which contributes to human life as a whole.

For this reason, self-judgment holds a deciding hand in human values. Man is the only animal that looks at himself and judges himself; he is the only animal that can be made unhappy by self-contempt or made strong by self-respect. He is the only animal that makes pictures of anything, the only one that makes portraits of himself, writes diaries, or regards a clean conscience as having anything to do with his happiness.

This makes a man terribly vulnerable to social approval or social ostracism, much concerned about that standing in the community of which we were speaking, and ready to do a good deal which he would not do for dear No. 1 in order to keep the regard of his neighbors. But it also makes him, now and then, able to stand very much by himself if he is sure he is right and able to sacrifice almost anything to
promote an idea which he believes needs his support or championship. This is the great thing about human nature which the usual theories about human instincts forget. It was the capacity for this sort of fanaticism which gave the United States, and the American farm, its first occupants; it was this force in them which leads us, when we look at the fields they cleared, the miles of stone wall they built, the deep wells they drove into glacial till, the granite rocks they built into cellar walls and even into pigpens, to say, "They were men," and to feel anything but sorry for them!

The kind of satisfaction they got out of life any man can have at their kind of cost, provided only he has also their kind of conviction and their kind of purpose growing out of it. This is not a very useful prescription, inasmuch as there is no use hunting around for a purpose in order to secure a human kind of happiness. Purposes have to grow on their own ground! However, I do not apologize: the present task is not to prescribe, but to report the truth about human values. And the truth is (no matter what the current Freudian or other natural-human-animal psychologizing of the moment may appear to indicate) that any set of values falls short of being a set of human values unless it is built around a self-respecting purpose that calls out the peculiar powers of the individual.

**THE SATISFACTIONS OF FARM LIFE**

One reason for the perpetual fascination of farm life is the tangible satisfaction it offers for this fundamental interest in putting ideas into effect, the interest in creation. The man in the city office may have endless ideas for changing his physical surroundings, but he is not free to use his muscles on them, not even to smash the furniture. The industrial laborer is using his muscles, but he is not free to carry out his own plans. The farmer's situation is free in both ways: it makes planning necessary, the imagination which belongs to forethought; and it provides the satisfaction of being able to work at these his own plans with all the power that is in him. Creating in this sense is his business.

And also in another sense. He effects the first transformation of the useless into the useful.

We say that the frontier is gone, the first transformation of the wilderness into the cultivable land. But there are numerous kinds of frontier in the world. There is the frontier of the craftsman, that is to say, the line where his skill meets the obstacle it cannot yet surmount. There is the frontier of the scientist, the line between knowledge and ignorance. And there is the frontier between barrenness and fertility, the frontier of the farmer, a line that is always being pushed back but which is never banished and forever threatens to return. This line is a line between life and death, both for the farmer and for the community; for unless the farmer can continue to make the soil yield enough living matter for living people, all human life stops. This is the commonplace miracle of the farming process. The city takes it for granted; the farmer knows its incessant risks and perils.

He is said to be conservative, and in a sense he is so; for he is not
dealing with any simple matter of bolts and screws, he is dealing with the sensitive balance of forces affecting germination and growth, the most intricate processes of nature. He knows only too well that any onlooker can propose an improvement in his methods but that not one in a hundred can devise a real improvement. Hence he properly distrusts the salesman. But he remains the perpetual pioneer and innovator. No implement factory could survive two seasons unless farmers were prepared to try out new tools and to devise improvements on them. He is an ally of all the crafts and sciences in his efforts to improve the art of working his primary miracle of making things grow.

There is a great deal of nonsense talked about farming and the satisfactions of farming. It is especially foolish to speak of farming as though it were one sort of thing instead of a dozen very different sorts of thing, especially in North America. It is peculiarly silly to talk about the joys of being "next to Nature," without distinguishing between the times when Nature is a very agreeable companion and the times when her storms, her winter rigors, her excesses of dryness and wetness, her untamed irregularities turn the best plans into dust and ashes and empty pockets. But it remains true that farming survives, and will always continue to attract men to itself, because the farmer is, among all ups and downs, a successful creator in the sense that the ideas of his brain do get themselves built into visible living products and that this, his personal success, is at the same time an absolutely necessary social good.

There is another thing about farming which has struck me as important, though I am not sure how far my farming brethren will agree with me. That is, the all-around weariness which comes of farm labor. I stress the word "all-around." Every man gets weary in some spot or other if he works hard at his job. But he is likely to tire one set of muscles or nerves and come out an unevenly wearied man, looking for some equally unbalanced amusement to smooth him out. The farmer has no such need; at least in the summer evenings, he is not looking for any amusement. He is fatigued all over; and when he rests, he rests all over.

He does not shine in evening entertainments; if he goes out he is likely to get sleepy. He is not disposed to burn midnight oil or electric current keeping up his reading. He neither wishes to make speeches nor to listen to them. It is hard for him to keep up the Grange or any other social institution during these active months. He regrets it. I admit the disadvantage, but I wish to congratulate him for at least one consequence. He retains soundness of nerve, clearness of eye, and steadiness of judgment. He is relatively free from that onset of nervous disorders which is carrying so large a percentage of our city population into the asylums, public and private.

When the natural reservoir of energy is exhausted evenly, nature rises nobly to the occasion and fills it up again. Hence the large proportion of the finest specimens of mankind which the farm produces; physical breadth of beam joined with a corresponding mental and moral breadth—for the sound man thinks well rather than ill of his neighbors, his thoughts extend beyond himself, and he plots for the good of his village and his township. His sons replenish the worn-out stock of the businesses and professions.
There is a seamy side to this, of course. The physical work of the farm is never done, because its possibilities are infinite; and the effort to do it all breaks many a man, turns many another into a working machine with no springs, develops occasional individuals of great stature who work the weaker ones around them to death, perhaps their wives or their children. Farming does not of itself beget the wisdom of restraint in labor; and as respect for the seventh day wanes, the quieter necessities of relaxation are increasingly neglected.

The remedy for this lies not so much in preaching recreation as in carrying further our analysis of the things that make up the good life, whether on the farm or elsewhere.

I will speak of three elements of welfare or happiness—family life, property, and the wider horizon.

**Family Life**

The farm has an opportunity for normal family life which is still definitely superior to that of the city, in spite of rapid recent changes. This superiority lies in part in the fact that children are more welcome; there is less artificial restriction of birth; the sexual atmosphere is cleaner. It lies further in the facts that when children do arrive, the family relation is less distracted, and the home is less likely to be interrupted by the absence of the mother; the occupation of the father is before their eyes; the area of common life is greater. Then, further, with greater freedom of physical action there is the natural discipline of an early taking part in the common work of the family. Just because the community is less dense and outer associations less numerous and less near, the family has to be more nearly self-sufficient in its mental as well as physical resources, has to find its own way to fun and mutual help, is a more compact society. Wherever to the ordinary routine of farm life there are added what normal family life can supply—love, economy, good foodstuffs, good cooking, simple and abundant hospitality, and the inescapable relation of cause and effect, effort and reward—there is a primary education unsurpassed in its possibilities for forming not alone the character but the mind also.

For the farmer, his family is the chief enlarger of his life; and if he can find satisfaction in his children, it may be his chief reward.

The farmer is likely to define this satisfaction in terms of handing his farm on to a son; he likes to think of his occupation as hereditary. The early sharing of everybody in farm work, if it is well managed on his part, might naturally have the effect of creating an ambition in all the young ones for the farm as a joint enterprise and a certain ingrained desire to carry it on. It is at this point that a good many farmers fail.

A farmer may overburden his children and lead them to seek escape. He may explain too little and consult too little and so leave them in the position of laborers rather than of partners. He may forget that while everyone has in his constitution somewhere a hankering for the farm, the modern farm calls for a special talent. A first-rate farmer like a first-rate poet has to be born; not everyone can be either. We cannot make farming strictly hereditary and at the same time keep that respect for individual talent which is the very genius of American
life. If the young men are not farmers by instinct, they ought not to be held to the farm. The only thing that ought to hold them is, again, that human value—the sense of power in the use of one's own imagination and thought. In the long run, the state must do its part to make farming a hopeful occupation, having its due respect and its due income; unless it does so the farms will be and should be deserted. But while the state labors on this intricate problem, the farmer as parent can do much to make farming an attractive outlook for, let us say, one of his sons. And if in their interest he curbs his all-work program, this effort will make him a larger, more liberal, and happier man.

While it is to the interest of the community that farming should be to a large extent hereditary, since the special skills and tempers involved can best be kept by a father-to-son transmission, and since the prospect of handing the farm on as capital gives the farmer a strong motive to conserve its soil and enhance its value, it is not to be expected or desired that farming should be wholly hereditary. We don't want any caste lines in North America; we want circulation. There must be a generation that leaves the farm and a generation that returns to it, with added appreciation because of its absence.

Even the tyro who comes from the city to start farming in complete ignorance of his own ignorance should be tolerated. The amateur who runs a subsistence homestead, the farmer-mechanic who raises his food and does day's labor when he can, the laborer-farmer who tries to dovetail the factory season with the farming season; yes, even the city man who runs a farm with hired skill as well as hired help—all of these intruders should be allowed a place in the wide variety of the farming way of life. Such marginal characters do diminish the market for the genuine farmer's cash crop. But they will never amount to more than a fringe of the farm population; and they help to maintain that kind of liaison between farm, industry, and city which is necessary for the sound unity of national life.

**Property**

Property is today's bread and butter, and if you have enough of it, the promise that there will be bread and butter tomorrow. Most men consider the accumulation of a small property chiefly in the light of a protection for the years of declining strength. For these purposes it makes very little difference whether it is in the form of land, personal effects, money, or securities. But property has other purposes, for which it makes a great deal of difference what kind it is. For these purposes property in land—real estate—is far more personal than property in money or tokens of money which go by the name of personal.

Property that one can handle, use, take care of, does a great deal to educate its possessor. A child who owns a toy learns in time to take care of toys (more or less) as the price of having them; and the boy who has made a whistle cares more for it than for a better whistle bought on the market. Tangible and durable property like a farm responds to treatment, and so carries on through the years a silent conversation with its owner, telling him what kind of man he is and what sort of head he has. Most men have much to learn from this
quiet and unanswerable instruction; and most men make a fair start at learning it.

Whatever a man completely owns, whether it be a whole farm or but a single tool or animal, it is that bit of property which most completely reflects the kind of man he is. For this bit of property can be regarded as a small domain in which he is king. For whatever happens in that domain, he is responsible; and conversely, whatever he wants to do there, he is at liberty to do. If he wants to neglect, abuse, or even destroy his property, he is within his right, so long as he causes no suffering or nuisance by doing so. If he wants to experiment with it, he may. If he has an idea for increasing its value, he may put it into effect. In brief, he enjoys the privileges of rulership and learns by experience what kind of ruler he would make! This is an invaluable kind of experience for a democracy. For a democracy is workable only if its citizens are accustomed to command and to rule and know from experience the meaning, the difficulties and burdens of authority. Democracy does not consist in taking authority away from everybody, but in giving everybody a bit of authority. And everyman's bit of private property, be it large or small, is his special field for gaining experience in the use of authority. It furnishes apprenticeship in responsibility. It is for this reason that the farm, as an actual domain, has been so significant a training ground for our democracy.

It is significant also in another way. If the farmer through this experience learns something about himself, his neighbors also are learning about him. They can tell by the appearance of his horses or his barn floor, the condition of his tools, his harnesses, his silo, whether he is slack or one who loves his work and his stock. If you want to know about a man, you can often tell more by seeing his place than by seeing the man himself. This is a very important social meaning of property.

Let us put it this way: Property makes the man visible and accessible. I cannot see a man's mind or his character. But when I see what he has chosen and what he does with it, I know what he likes, and quite a good deal about his principles.

The moral importance of property lies in the fact that the owner is not compelled to do well with it; he may be mean, foolish, dissipated, selfish. The beauty of being hospitable is that it is a free act; one does not have to be. Try to compel citizens to be generous and public-spirited in the management of property, and generosity ceases to be a virtue. Property develops character because it allows the free expression of personal traits and invites the social judgment which follows mistakes in its use. The institution justifies itself because for the most part men learn through this social judgment to avoid the chief abuses and to make a respectable use of their freedom. It is only on this condition that the state can continue to recognize the right of property in its full extent.

**RESPONSE TO SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE**

With these things in mind, it seems evident that the full meaning of property is hardly anywhere represented so well as in the owner-
ship of farms. This ownership is not alone raising crops; it is making citizens. Any radical change in the form or extent of farm ownership becomes a matter of importance for the state as a whole. This is the basis of the economic theory of history, according to which changes in technique and in the accompanying forms of ownership are the major factors in social change.

Living as we do in an era of rapid economic development, it is important for us to inquire how far this theory is true. It seems obvious that changes in tools and methods must alter the habits of man; but does this change in habit carry a change in character? Take an example:

Time was when logs had to be yarded out by men and horses; now the tractor invades the winter woods and does its marvels, rides over obstacles that would use up the best team of horses. But who drives the tractor? Probably not the teamster, but a new kind of acrobat with a new variety of seat holding and steering, with knowledge of his mount, its powers and limits of performance, its anatomy, and the possibility of repair. His courage, hardihood, and skill are of a different sort from those of the teamster, but they are not less. Sympathy with the animal is transformed into sympathy with the machine and an understanding of the beast into mechanical intelligence. Endurance is called for in both cases; the rigors of winter are certainly not abated for the tractor driver, nor is his seat softened, and he with his machine has often to take a kind of punishment the old woodsman knew nothing about.

The point is that the change in the man which follows change in technique runs less deep than we sometimes fear, far less deep than the economic theory of history would have us suppose. The primary principles of initiative, competitive skill, team play, individualism, and loyalty are not changed by the simple course of technical advance.

But there is a side of this change that does affect character. That is, the change in the position of ownership. The operator of our logging tractor is not usually the owner—the machine may belong to the company. Logging has become a more impersonal affair than it used to be; large bodies of capital are involved, and the work is done by contract. As a result, men no longer risk their lives in the jams of the Androscoggin narrows for the sake of their local name and for the delivery of goods to an unknown purchaser. Heroism and greatness leak out of the business: a different morale reigns in the woods. This is typical of what is happening quite generally in North America, though newer ideals may arise to replace the old.

It is true that most of the changes that have swept over farm life in North America in the last quarter century have come because they were wanted. New tools have made their way because they were improvements. I have neighbors who still remember when my farm was plowed by oxen and the hay mowed by hand. Nobody banished the oxen from New England farms; that was done by the fact that the horse with lesser strength was a nimbler beast. And nobody banishes the horse except where the tractor can more than take his place. No improvement, to be sure, is quite all an improvement; there are still things the horse can do which the tractor cannot do, and there are still oxen to be found in odd corners. Improvements
are only on the whole and with some loss. Admitting this, we may still say that most recent changes affecting farming have come with the farmer's approval and are to the good.

But individual changes have cumulative effects not foreseen by anybody. We can now see certain massive changes in the spirit of the American farm; the vast middle area of fertile land no longer presents anything like the traditional picture of the American farm. Even in the marginal farms of New England the alteration runs deep. Do these changes make the American farmer less independent in his character, less a person, less stable, less the rock he has hitherto been in the maintenance of our institutions?

The most conspicuous of these changes may be labeled the urbanization of the country and the industrializing (and capitalizing) of the farm. Let us look more closely at each of them.

**The Urbanization of the Country**

In all ages of human history there is a different temper of life (and a different tempo) in the country from that in the town. And in all ages there has been a tendency to import the spirit of the town into the country—to urbanize it. For city life, always based more completely than that of the country on a money economy, has been able to experiment with new elements of comfort which can slowly enter into the national standard of living everywhere; and the clash of talents in the centers brings about a vivid cultural life and inventiveness whose products the country is prone to desire. Such urbanization has often brought decay in the fiber of a people. Philosophers of history have often seen in the process a phase of an inevitable rhythm leading to decline in the birth rate and the inner decay of a civilization. For the country breeds a type of man in whom natural virtues are ingrained; whereas the man of the town, living at a distance from raw materials and relying on trade and wit, tends to assume that life is satisfactory in proportion to the success of the artifices by which pain and effort are avoided. These two types (it is believed) cannot be rolled into one. Human nature requires a moral division of labor, and the city type, however much it resembles a flower, is in reality a parasite and could not survive were not the foundation there to sustain it. No civilization survives when the urbanité becomes the model for all groups.

If this is the case, we are indeed in danger. For in no age of the world has the urbanization of farm life proceeded so fast and so far as in the United States in the last half century. This is due largely to the fact that among the most conspicuous changes are those in the instruments of attack whereby any part of the national life can be invaded by any other part. The telephone, the radio, and the automobile have put an end to loneliness; but they have also done much to put an end to privacy. The farm (which has had a surplus of loneliness, especially in the long northern winters) has not merely admitted, it has eagerly embraced these instruments of invasion. Whatever the conception of music, of news values, of entertainment, of sport may be at the broadcasting center, those conceptions thrust themselves on the listener, who feels that in listening he is sharing in the actualities of the life of his time. If being invaded is being corrupted, the
country has revelled in being corrupted! We are far from asserting that this is the case; all that we here assert is that, by its own complicity, the country is actively mixing cityhood into itself at a rate never before realized in history.

And certainly each of these changes taken by itself is for the better. The average farm home has not all, but soon will have much of the equipment, convenience, quick communication, electric power, instant news, and home-borne amusement of the city. Things are moving that way. Building, heating, lighting, sanitation of the farm are planned on the same lines as those of the city. This is only to say that the common basis of our national civilization has risen all around to a higher level. A new sense of community of experience and ease of understanding between town and country has been created.

It is hard to believe that anyone would want these changes undone. The question remains whether, taken together, this urbanization has changed the character of the farmer in any way that should give us concern. This question will be reverted to shortly.

Industrialization and Capitalization

The second type of change is more obviously menacing for the quality of our civilization. For the invasion of the country by the absentee powers of organized capital, replacing resident ownership by tenancy or by industrialized operation, may possibly carry to the great farm areas some of the social distempers of industrial centers.

The primary social problem of our time relates to the destiny of capitalism as a system. It is a system of free initiative, depending on the free use of privately owned capital to produce wealth and incidentally provide employment for labor. This freedom of the individual capitalist is anything but capricious, since capital can only be employed by employing; but it is here that the chief difficulty is felt, since labor becomes dependent on an employment which it cannot directly control. Such dependent persons may reach the point where the right to work becomes the biggest thing in their lives; it becomes a craving to get access to tools, materials, land—to be able to make a living, where the will to labor is strong. If this demand remains unsatisfied, it tends to turn against capitalism as a system and to call for its replacement by some system in which the ownership of the means of production is less private and less free. To the insecure man, security may seem far more desirable than liberty, whether for himself or for others.

In its normal operation capitalism takes care of labor's will to work, and therefore does not breed a proletariat, that is, a body of men dependent on employment at another man's choice, insecure, detached, propertyless, discontented, unfulfilled. This is the disease, not the normal order and not the usual order; still, a disease not yet entirely mastered.

But suppose that this same process invades the farm, which has been (at least theoretically) the refuge of the man who determines at all costs to retain his independence and his power to work. Suppose farms are sold out (under pressure or otherwise) to interests which speculate on their productivity; suppose these interests let them to operators who are not owners; suppose these operators in turn lose
their hopes and fail in their payments. Then a semitethered, disheartened, spiritless class arises ready to strike hands with the malcontents of the industries. Capitalism will then have bred a double group of critics bent less on its reform than on its overturn. And agriculture in that place will have ceased to develop the American citizen. The matter is of public concern from both angles.

Capitalism can maintain its health only on three conditions. (1) It must take the problem of employment as its collective responsibility; it must satisfy the will to work. (2) The owning and use of capital must be widespread through the community—the possibility of saving and of earning through saving must be general. (3) Ownership in its full sense must be widely diffused; this means the ownership of real property instead of mere abstract tokens such as money and securities. And real property comes to its best expression in the farm operated by its owner or owners; for here we have capital bearing its natural and unchallenged fruit in direct response to labor and intelligent investment. The present changes appear to lead away from this third condition in the direction of widespread dependency of the worker and disaffection from his work.

These changes of capitalization and industrialization do not affect all American farming to the same extent or produce everywhere the same results. They light most easily in the great prairie regions where yield may be tangibly increased by highly capitalized production and where production that is not capitalized appears to be wasteful. The more difficult farms of the border States, eastern and western, remain relatively untouched by these changes, though they are driven by Midwest competition to new specializations. Thus the first result of these changes is simply to increase the diversity in the types of life covered by the word "farming"; the farm life of the great American Plains will be a type of its own.

But that type cannot continue to be based on tenancy and absentee ownership. Capitalization, when it cannot be carried by the individual farmer, can perhaps be carried by cooperating groups of farmers. However this may be, it has become a public concern that farm property, be it small or large, be it completely owned or partly owned, be it owned individually or (to some extent) collectively, shall continue to do its part in the building of the American individual and democrat.

And we have to remember that neither economic change nor its consequences are inevitable. There is no such mysterious thing as an economic force apart from the conscious desires of men. The more efficient method of production is inevitable only when and so far as there is no social interest against it. If there is such a contrary interest—if, for example, a given method of plowing and planting leads to soil ruin or if a new method of financing eats out the spirit of the human operator—these methods are to be altered by the free human will; and if they are too much for the individual, they become fit subjects of community, perhaps of governmental attention.

THE WIDER HORIZON

We have spoken of family life and of property; we have now to speak of the wider horizon.
Everyone knows that there is a wider horizon; everyone demands a frame for his laboriousness and is grateful for those glints of distance and wholeness that sometimes break into conversation through the factualities of a business deal or the noontime talk when men are stretched out together under a tree discussing such weighty matters as whether a good coon dog will be satisfied with treeing the coon or will sometimes tackle him and if so how. But everyone knows too that a life of labor can drain men of vitality and that this wider horizon calls for an effort which few by themselves are in a position to make.

The advantage of having a traditional religion was that this wider horizon was periodically opened up by an especially appointed person who was not worn out and who could rely on a good representation of the community setting aside a time for opening up the wider horizon. The writer is not prepared to say that there is any substitute for the regular, deliberate, habit-breaking, and sky-revealing operations of the Sunday service if it could only become sensible, pertinent to actual problems, and beautiful.

But let us assume for the moment that the church is going through a molting period and cannot, in any case, do all that is needed for the farmer of today. The farm community must come to the help of the individual since all the impulses to get a more vivid grasp of the whole scene in which our lives are placed are intensified when a group acts on them together. Individualism sometimes seems to set itself in contrast to the common life; but not the individualism that builds a democracy. For the democratic process does not consist in registering the separate votes of independent thinkers who neither know nor care what anyone else thinks; it consists in making everyone aware, through discussion, of what others think, so that each decision when it comes shall have the whole community of thought as its basis. The more solidly the community acts and feels together on the big issues of life, the more democracy there will be. Individualism grows in the soil of a common tradition, a common amusement (no one can say how much baseball has contributed to form the American spirit and to unite city and country), a common education, and a common culture.

And as for this common culture, there has never been a time so hopeful as the present for making this somewhat vague and slippery entity a solid fact for the life of the American farmer. We are at the moment getting over the superstition that culture is equivalent to schooling; we are finding the vital ways in which the human mind continues to nourish itself throughout life, largely aided by the maturity which comes of adult years and labor. The occupation of the farmer is bringing its own enlargement with it; agriculture is now as never before a world interest. As soon as a world market exists, planting in every country is governed to some extent by planting in every other; methods and standards of living in every country become a concern of every other. The Chinese rice fields, the jute of India, the rubber of Malaya, the wheat of the Ukraine, the wool of Australia have now, in addition to their romantic and pictorial interest, a direct meaning in terms of American livelihood. Knowledge of the world becomes the right of the farmer in a new sense; he is immediately
affected by the fact that half the human race are on the land in India and China. And the means of making this a living and growing interest are in our hands.

Let me mention some of the elements of culture which belong especially to the farm.

**Literature**

The great literature of the world is now accessible to everybody in the United States. The periodical literature is also accessible, but there are no adequate guides to it for farm readers. The farmer's magazines do a fair job in the way of technical and political notes; but they have had to keep costs low, and they do little for the mind. There is room for a better type of rural journal, but there is also a need that some of the great American journals which are not specifically for the farm should take on the task of representing farm life, its interests, its inner greatness, its heroism, its dangers, its possibilities, as part of their function. This is the only way in which the wealth of resource which is at the disposal of our best journalism can come within reach of farm readers.

**The Arts**

The social arts and amusements are at home everywhere and have their own local flavors, though it may require a degree of conscious effort to keep some of the dancing and festival customs alive through the present period of reshuffling of habits. Music has a more universal reach, and if it is nurtured, it can become a force in any American community, especially if there are a few of north-European stock to help the enterprise.

But the undeveloped gold mine lies in the drama. No one knows until he has tried to find out what persons in any community have the gift of acting; great surprises are in store for one who makes the first attempt. Acting is the most effective introduction to great literature; and there is hardly a village in the United States so poor in talent as not to be able to make a beginning.

**The Sciences and Philosophy**

Science and philosophy are no longer subjects that can be kept enclosed in the schools and colleges; they belong to the thinking public and therefore to the farm public. The farm is a consumer of scientific progress; the farmer can be a consumer of scientific truth without regard to its application. Is he not an inhabitant of the cosmos? Are not the stars for him, and the seasons, and the minute infinitudes within the atom? It requires the sciences to tell the actual situation of human life in the world. It requires philosophy then to inquire what it all means, and what kind of life can be made of it.

Our colleges might do more than they do in this way, whether for the student or for the mature citizen. They expend great labor on the finesse of argument; but they are likely to fail to give the one thing most needed—a simple statement of the commonplaces of value and of ethics. Just as in the art of living, it is the commonplaces of which we need to be reminded from time to time. Our American life would be richer and wiser in all its corners if every teacher were as aware of
A Philosophy of Life for the American Farmer

this as was "old Stanty," of Ames, under whom the writer studied mathematics. He was a great teacher of his subjects; but he was an even greater teacher of the common morals of the day's work. "We must keep our work on a high plane; we must not let it descend to this low level"—few of his students willingly heard that speech addressed to them more than once. None of them forgot the commonplace truth that there is in all work a level of performance which can give it dignity and honor. The writer suggests faculty conferences on the ethical commonplaces, which will take this great human interest out of the hands of professional philosophers and make it what it is, the invitation of every man to the ennoblement of his day's work.

Philosophy and religion share in the function of tapping the vein of seriousness with which the responsible man wishes to face his more difficult passes of experience. The most dangerous feature of contemporary life is not its transition but the fact that in the course of change our capacity for serious thought has so far diminished. The underlying sadness and hollowness of much modern life is due not to poverty nor to too great labor but to an absence of depth, a fear lest meditation should show the emptiness of the affair we call life. Philosophy is the business of taking stock, at least once; it is the passage to manhood. It should be especially the right of the man who, standing near the earth, knows it both in its threat and its promise, sees it both as the receiver of death and the producer of life, knows by direct handling how closely the tangible living body is welded to the intangible and infinite mystery of consciousness and of the soul.