



THE FOUNDATION FOR ECONOMIC EDUCATION, INC.

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A Word for Skepticism

IN THE FARM CIRCLES of my boyhood nothing was considered more disgraceful than “to be made a sucker of.” To be taken in by swindlers, con men, or operators of shell games spelled disaster for folks in our circumstances. Skepticism, in the sense of being free from naïveté, was part of our folkways; it had a measure of survival value.

Such a background, coupled with a limited formal education, may explain why I have always been so favorably impressed by the idea that a healthy skepticism is a mark of an educated man: “Is it not a fact that we can tell an educated man from another . . . chiefly by his capacity for resisting another man’s thoughts and defending his own views?”¹ Or, as Sainte-Beuve phrased it: “A skeptic is not one who doubts, but one who examines.”

This suggests that a worth-while education might well include training in skepticism and a development of the critical mind alert enough to challenge another’s thoughts, able to resist popular abracadabra. An education of this sort would help one to see things as they are and, at the same time, generate an abhorrence toward being “taken in.” Much of to-

day’s schooling does not qualify by this standard, so I wish to put in a word for that kind of training which would unmask loose thinking, chicaneries, plausibilities, clichés, panaceas, nostrums, and the like.

In our contemplation of this problem, we should confess that everyone of us harbors numerous faults, errors, notions, shallow ideas, incipient inanities. But we should also note that

The worst in us rises to the top and takes over the control of society in the absence of talent, virtue, and an alert, penetrating skepticism.

these remain dormant and harmless in certain environments and then, in other situations favorable to nonsense, flare up as awesome and destructive action. The total of inanities — the dormant and active taken together — proba-

bly varies but little from decade to decade; I suspect they were as prevalent at the turn of the century as they now are in the mid-sixties. However, they were more or less quiescent then, whereas presently they are on the rampage. All of which suggests that we should reflect on the forces which keep inanities in a harmless state; that is, we should know what it is that holds them at bay.

BY FAR the most potent force, of course, is what Jefferson referred to as a natural human aristocracy of virtue and talent. When the aristocratic spirit is in ascendancy, that is,

¹ From *The Art of Thinking* by Abbe Ernest Dimmet (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1929), p. 57.