human level, the controlling force in society is *the consensus*. Free market education, for instance, will never replace government education until there is a consensus favoring the change. The same condition must be met if TVA is to be returned to private ownership, or labor unions divested of coercive power, or social security abolished! We who desire a change for the better must look to a higher grade consensus—nothing less.

What is this controlling force, the consensus? It cannot, in my view, be defined with any precision. The best I can do is to refer to it as the *current* condition or state or quality of the overall luminosity, sometimes called knowledge in society. This is a body of underlying assumptions, of ideas taken for granted and held more or less in common. It is part of a peoples' immemorial heritage, creative wisdom, culture, custom—the knowledge or wisdom, or the lack of it, by which we prosper or perish.[1] It is a nebulous, ever-changing, unpredictable and somewhat indiscernible force. A corrupted consensus is associated with societal decline; an enlightened consensus accounts for societal ascendancy. In any event, this is the force that presides.

Let us say I have been born into a particular civilization — Occidental, Oriental, Polynesian, African, or whatever. Whichever one it is, I am a lone individual among many millions. Next, assume that I have my heart set on improving the civilization into which I have been cast. What are my chances? Roughly, somewhat better than my chances of improving the societal situation in the United States! For the consensus is of a greater magnitude than any particular civilization; it is the cultural, spiritual, moral, intellectual, political, and economic upshot of them all. This is not to imply any similarity among the numerous civilizations of which the present consensus is an "upshot." To picture the consensus of our time, think of the mighty Amazon, and the civilizations as the countless tributaries which feed it—some tiny, others large, and each of varying composition.

Today's consensus is the residual legatee of mankind's history; it is the latest stage in human evolution—or decline, as some might have it—but, rising or falling, it's all of one piece, and we of our time stand at the growing edge of it. Realizing the enormity of the consensus that presides over social affairs, I hesitate to think of myself as being able to move it this way or that; and, thus, I would never agree that "*We* must lead *them* our way, a *step* at a time."

WHY this attempt to discover the individual's relationship to the consensus? In my view, it is necessary that each recognize his own limitations before he can even begin to realize his potentialities. To assume that I have a greater say-so than is actually the case is to place myself at an impotent level. When I think I can do that which I cannot, then my actions will be in the realm of the impossible, governed by sheer fancy, and the effort thus in vain. To focus on controlling the consensus is as unrealistic as to focus on controlling continental drifts. Am I saying that the individual has no role to play? Indeed, not! All depends upon where the eye is cast.

Reflect on the unruly consensus. Living on its growing edge, we can, even in the short span of a lifetime, observe its shifting. During the past few decades it appears to be deteriorating, as it has on earlier occasions. However, history reveals that the consensus occasionally has shown improvement, this being the aspiration of concerned citizens. And every shift—up or down, now or whenever—has been or is a consequence of actions by those who live on its growing edge. This is to say that the consensus is a by-product of human action, and any shift in the current consensus is a by-product of our own actions.

Let us not waste words on how the consensus deteriorates except to note that it's the easiest process conceivable, simple as falling off a log: the *absence* of thinking, of disciplines, of high moral standards — the pursuit of excellence abandoned; in brief, people deterioration!

An improving consensus, on the other hand, results solely from the practice of difficult human virtues; it is the over-all luminosity *of a people* on the upgrade. No single person among us rules that luminosity, and it is utterly useless to try to do so. Instead, the eye has to be exclusively on the source of that luminosity, that is, on the illumination of one's self. The consensus at any point in time is composed of what's handed down to a people *plus* what they put into it.

WHAT they put into it! If this analysis be correct, then those of our time who are devoted to the freedom philosophy should never endorse any socialism — coercive collectivism — none whatsoever. For, by so doing, socialistic ideas are put into the consensus, *and by us!* This we do whenever we advocate a form of socialism, supposedly less bad, in order to "lead them our way, a step at a time." Away with gradualism! It is an ill-advised methodology.

And let not anyone underestimate the effect on the consensus when the eye is focused on self-illumination rather than on the consensus. Literature of the past—history—tells of brilliant stars by the thousands, men actively in pursuit of truth who, by exemplary behavior, shifted the consensus in an improving direction. Then, too, there have been millions of unpublicized contributors over the centuries whose names have never come down to us!

Can the personal quality that generates light—the dynamo, so to speak, of an enlightened consensus—be identified or pin-pointed? Unquestionably, it is *growth* in perception, awareness, consciousness. To play one's role in the enlightenment requires only that he attend to his own growth, and express it honestly. And here's the interesting fact: it makes no difference from what level an individual begins his growth. Socrates contributed mightily to an improved consensus only because he was always growing. Precisely the same can be said of a "lowly fisherman of Galilee." Growth, from whatever level, is the generative force.

The unruly consensus rules, but its rule, if improving, is determined exclusively by the human beings who are upgrading themselves in consciousness, in word, and in day-to-day deeds. The formula is simple, and its execution is the way to extract from life its greatest offering.

Leonard E. Read
PRESIDENT

[1] "Custom, therefore, is not the accidental, trivial, and meaningless thing which we sometimes think it to be. It is the imperishable record of the wisdom of the illimitable past reaching back to the infancy of the race, revised, corrected, enlarged, open to all alike, and read and understood by all." (See *Law, Its Origin, Growth and Function* by James Coolidge Carter. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907, p. 127.)

A Seminar at Fee

FEBRUARY 12, 13, 14

5:00 pm Friday
through
Sunday luncheon

Lecturers: LUDWIG VON MISES
EDMUND A. OPITZ
LEONARD E. READ
GEORGE C. ROCHE III
BENJAMIN A. ROGGE

Board, Room, Tuition: $50.00

To enroll, use order form.

Tax Reform Act of 1969

- FEE filed IRS form 4653 on August 4, 1970.
- On October 23 we received notification that FEE is *not* a private foundation.
- Thus, contributions to FEE remain deductible for income tax purposes.
- A copy of the IRS ruling will be sent on request.