when the pursuit of excellence in all things is the tendency of the time – at least on the part of a distinguished few – inanities remain relatively dormant. Displayed under such circumstances, they appear ridiculous; the intellectual soil is simply unfavorable to the fruition of mental weeds and viruses. When it is not respectable to display the worst in oneself – to let oneself go, as we say – the worst is held in check. Development of the aristocratic spirit elevates enlightened respectability to a dominant position. This is social insurance in its highest form.[2]

Perhaps the next best insurance against inanities rising to active social control is a healthy skepticism – by no means the doubting of everything but the questioning of everything that is doubtful. To illustrate: the earth-is-flat notion is utterly harmless. Its decline began with a skepticism about the old cosmology; today the notion is so thoroughly downed that one risks a charge of insanity by daring seriously to advance it. Fallacies cannot become virulent in the presence of a healthy skepticism.

Some will accuse me of going too far in illustrating my point with a notion so many of us know to be false – the idea that the earth is flat. Please note, however, that were counter beliefs removed, millions of earthlings are as ready to believe the flat notion as the spherical fact. Furthermore, notions equally nonsensical are heard on every hand. In the first instance, skepticism has done its work; in other cases, skepticism hasn't yet come into play.

It is not necessary to reach out or strain for examples; here's one that just came to my desk, by the president of one of the world's most generously financed business associations:

> The system of Old Age Survivors and Disability Insurance, *which preserves individual freedom of choice by paying benefits solely in cash,* should be extended to the entire population. (Italics mine.)

If that isn't on a par with the earth-is-flat notion, pray tell, what is? And what about such popular witless plausibilities as the following:

> The more complex the society, the more government control we need.
>
> If we had no social security, many people would go hungry.
>
> The government should do for the people what the people are unable to do for themselves.
>
> The size of the national debt doesn't matter because we owe it to ourselves.
>
> The free market ignores the poor.
>
> Human rights are more important than property rights.
>
> We're paying for it so we might as well get our share.
>
> Customers ought to be protected by price controls.
>
> The welfare state is the best protection against communism.
>
> Big business and big labor require big government.
>
> The United States Constitution was designed for an agrarian society.
>
> Private business should welcome government competition.
>
> The government can do it cheaper because it doesn't have to make a profit.
>
> Purchasing power creates jobs.
>
> Businessmen should work for the good of others.
>
> No one must profit from the misfortune of others.
>
> Rent control protects tenants.
>
> Government should control prices, but not people.[3]

Taking into account the relative opportunities for understanding, I firmly believe that more force of intellect was required to unmask the old cosmology and, thus, to down the earth-is-flat notion than is now necessary to see the fallacy in the foregoing clichés. The former was quite a feat in skepticism; seeing through these current and popular clichés should be light work for any bright schoolboy. Yet, the most vaunted educational institutions in the U.S.A. offer costly advocacy of these clichés; they are advanced as the ultimate in politico-economic wisdom; only now and then are there educators who train students in skepticism regarding these fallacies.

If a society is not to suffer a decline and fall, skepticism must increase as fallacies are activated. When socialistic fallacies are in extreme activation, as at present, persons with a skeptical turn of mind – trained in skepticism – may give the unfavorable appearance of being against everything. The reason for this false impression is that the prevalence of the fallacies engages so much of their thinking and explanation. We must point out, however, that their mistrust of socialism has its origin in what they do in fact believe in and stand for: a practice of the free market, private property, limited government philosophy. In short, they *understand and stand for* the market economy.

The market economy, the greatest gratifier of material human wants ever known to man, does not presuppose any supermen, authoritarians, masterminds. On the contrary, it is harmed and subverted by the introduction of any coercive masterminding of creative and productive activities. This way of life, unlike that commended by socialism, presupposes nothing more than ordinary people peacefully pursuing their own ends. The fundamental requirement for a proper understanding of the way of peaceful, willing exchange is to understand that no one does understand or needs to understand very much! An individual who has advanced to the point where he knows how little any person understands will, *when confronted with pretensions of omniscience,* have his skepticism aroused.

In summary, one might say that the contest in today's U.S.A. is between the I-know-I-don't-knows and the I-don't-yet-know-I-don't-knows. Socialism presupposes someone who knows how to deliver mail to the millions or fix their production, exchanges, prices, and the like. Socialism fails because the premise is wrong. The market economy, on the other hand, presupposes that no one knows how to mastermind society, and it works because the premise is correct.

Is it any wonder that the I-know-I-don't-knows have a lot of skepticism toward those who don't yet know how little they know? And entertain the hope that their skeptical tribe will increase?

Leonard E. Read
PRESIDENT

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[2] See the chapter, "Pursuit of Excellence," in my *Anything That's Peaceful.* (Irvington-on-Hudson, N. Y.: The Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., $2.50 paper; $3.50 cloth).

[3] For examples of skepticism applied to these and other fallacies, see *Clichés of Socialism* by numerous authors. (Irvington-on-Hudson, N. Y.: The Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., $2.00).

BLUES

"Isaiah's Job," the little essay by Albert J. Nock, is the best antidote we've found for a touch of the libertarian blues. If you need a copy, let us know.

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PEACE

During recent weeks, when trying to make the case for the free market, I have made reference to my new book, ANYTHING THAT'S PEACEFUL, only to discover that many did not receive the announcement sent from FEE. One-half of the first edition (10,000) is still available.

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