

The Story of a False Dawn

The Brave New World of the Enlightenment, by Louis I. Bredvold. *Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1962. 164 pp. \$3.95.*

IN THE SIX CHAPTERS of this stimulating contribution to intellectual history, Louis Bredvold, Professor (emeritus) of English at the University of Michigan, traces the fortunes of the "theory of natural law" and

related concepts through the pages of selected English and Continental thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like most well constructed stories, Professor Bredvold's account has a definite beginning, middle, and end. Earlier, he tells us, for a span of "nearly two thousand years"—from Cicero to Hobbes—the "doctrine of the Law of Nature"—i.e., "Right Reason, understandable by man, but existing in the divine mind as the source of law and justice"—"was one of the controlling principles of juristic philosophy and international law." Then came the complex of ideas and attitudes we call the Enlightenment, with a consequent (and, in Professor Bredvold's view, unfortunate) series of attacks on the doctrine "by a succession of great and influential writers all over Europe." To Thomas Hobbes, who geometrized man and his institutions, probably belongs the dubious honor of first proclaiming that "we could solve our social and moral problems if we only made our social sciences as scientific as mathematics and physics." Later "speculators," influenced in varying degrees by Hobbes, Newton, and Locke, widened the breach between human nature and conduct, on one hand, and the fixed, universal set of ethical imperatives explicit in the Law of Nature, on the other. All of them tended to analogize from science to morals and to develop a "mechanistic conception" of human psychology and action. Some theorists—notably Hobbes and Helvetius—emphasized the egoistic, essentially selfish traits of man, the machine, and deduced therefrom the necessity of an absolutist government to control, educate, and perfect mankind; a second, dominant group, including the Cambridge Platonists, Shaftesbury, Rousseau, Diderot, Prestley, and Godwin, reacted against so harsh an estimate of the human animal and stressed increasingly the natural, instinctive goodness of man, who, once freed from the

shackles of outmoded customs and institutions, could attain a brave new world by following his own nature rather than the nature of the ancients. Finally, at the end of the eighteenth century, Burke, primarily in his *Reflections on the French Revolution* (which Professor Bredvold dubs "one of the greatest and most influential political pamphlets of all time") exposed the radical defects, both theoretical and practical, in the "new philosophy" and eloquently "re-affirmed" the validity "of the Law of Nature, the conscience of mankind." "Thus our narrative comes full circle."

The story ends—but its lessons remain and should be pondered, Professor Bredvold asserts repeatedly, by twentieth-century "continuators of the Enlightenment." Burke and the ancients were right: an adequate theory of human nature must recognize that man is spirit as well as matter, that he "is incurably moral, incurably metaphysical, incurably religious." The Law of Nature, with all its transcendental values, endures forever. Science cannot create or define ethical principles.

Read as a tract for our own times, Professor Bredvold's volume comprises at once a trenchant commentary on the deficiencies of untried speculation regarding human affairs and also an urbane, persuasive defense of the Good and the True in the modern, "scientific" world. As an essay in the history of ideas, the book possesses the virtues we have learned to associate with expert cultivation of the discipline: impressive and wide-ranging erudition, deft exposition and manipulation of intellectual concepts, the interest and illumination produced by a fresh alignment of significant parts of discrete philosophical systems. These solid merits are accompanied, however, by at least two limitations, one of which seems almost generic to the history of ideas. In the first place, Professor Bredvold's isolation and collocation of selected

fragments of larger intellectual systems sometimes result in the oversimplification of the doctrine of individual thinkers. The discussion of Natural Laws in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, for example, is surely more complex than Professor Bredvold intimates; and, similarly, the Law of Nature enunciated in Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government* certainly deserves explanation in a work which imputes to Locke partial, if unintentional, responsibility for later attacks on the concept. Secondly, for some students, the position of the hero of Professor Bredvold's story is decidedly less secure than the author obviously assumes; Burke has his warm admirers, to be sure, but he also has his critics, who continue to raise important questions concerning the grounds and coherence of his various pronouncements.

Reviewed by GWIN J. KOLB