Editorial
Health: Mirage and Reality

The late René Dubos, the eminent microbiologist and pathologist at Rockefeller University, used to speak of "the mirage of health." By this he meant that we carry in our imaginations a picture of an ideal condition in which everything in the body is working perfectly and we are without hunger, thirst, pain, anxiety, strain, or any other challenge to our well-being. Such a condition, he insisted, is a mirage, an illusion, an image that has no counterpart in reality, although it appears from the distance to be both real and very near. People familiar with the sea and the desert know about mirages. Boats or islands seem to be standing out of the water, high above it. Clumps of green trees or lakes or mountains shine across the all-but-endless miles of desert country. Perfect health, said Dr. Dubos, is such a mirage. The only value it has is that it suggests that such a condition might ideally exist, and hence spurs our efforts to improve existing situations. Its ideal state allures and beckons, but it also deceives and frustrates because it can never be realized.

We probably owe this concept of health to the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650), a brilliant mathematician and one of the founders of the world view on which science has been based for nearly 400 years. This world view, following Descartes, makes a profound distinction between mind and body. Descartes' most famous sentence was, "Cogito ergo sum"—"I think, therefore I am." In short, the mind is the seat of thought, consciousness, personality. The mind inhabits a material body which is its home during its period here on earth. The mind is rational, emotional, creative. The body is a kind of machine, a clock which, when its parts are properly adjusted, runs perfectly. That is health. This concept has had far-reaching implications in the Western world.

It has been the starting place for a vigorous materialism on the part of science and medicine. If we can find no material basis for an illness, no clear cause of a pain, no fracture, no germs, no growth, the patient is not a medical problem, even though the symptoms persist and a health problem clearly exists. The effect of this division has been that medical science has made wonderful progress in understanding the mechanisms of the body, the way it functions and malfunctions, the effects on the body of microorganisms, the power of various chemicals to affect the body, reduce symptoms, manage pain, and drive out or suppress infection. But at the same time we have much to learn about health, how to prevent disease, how to help people stay out of hospitals and avoid the ways of life that cripple and destroy them, and above all how to
teach people to strengthen and develop their own inner resources for health and healing so that they are able to escape medical crisis and catastrophe. It is a marvelous mechanical achievement to transplant a human kidney or heart. It would be an equally great achievement if we could plant the knowledge that health is in large measure a matter of the sanity and self-control with which people manage their own lives and cultivate their own natural resources of healing and rehabilitation.

The Cartesian division between mind and body, the material and the spiritual, has governed our science and philosophy for a long time. It is a view that has had many constructive results and has enabled us to gain knowledge about many aspects of nature and human life. But it has, as we have always suspected, some limitations. The tendency of medical science has been to deal almost entirely with disease rather than healing, with the etiology of illness rather than the causes and conditions of health. One sign of this concentration on illness is the revolutionary nature of new health maintenance approaches to medical care. Heart disease, cancer, and many other afflictions are not invaders from outside the personality. They develop out of the ways of life that have become commonly accepted among large numbers of people: constant stress, tension, emotional disorder, alcohol, drugs, hostility, fear, and chronic anxiety have results in the malfunctioning of the human body. One cannot escape all illnesses by ordering one's life sanely, but one can escape many of them and rise above others by cultivating sound attitudes of eating, sleeping, working, resting, playing, loving, and learning in the world one inhabits with one's fellow human beings.

The most serious and profound questionings of the materialistic, mechanistic view of science have come from scientists themselves. In particular, physicists have found that, in their study of the activity of atoms and subatomic particles, the categories of materialism are inadequate to describe what seems to be going on. They do not discover tiny, discrete bits of material reality as the early atomists thought. They see movement and patterns of movement, interrelationships, attractions, and conflicting forces. They see predictable relations and directions, along with uncertainties and open-ended paths of activity. In short, if as an ignorant layman we can say anything about their discoveries, what the quantum physicists are telling us today is that they see process, change, even creation as the primary reality and not material bits of matter that we used to call atoms. This is an enormously suggestive insight that has implications throughout our whole culture. All we can hope to do here is indicate some of its possible implications for health and human welfare.

In the first place, we must learn to think about human health and, indeed, about nature and the world itself, organically. The clear distinction between mind and body or spirit and matter no longer holds. We do not know what happens to the soul in religious and theological language. Certainly the qualities that have distinguished the soul in the past still exist, but they may be seen as composite, part of a much larger and more complex pattern of existence in which each individual is involved. Perhaps the best perspective in which to see the idea of the soul will be not as a distinct personality separate from all other souls, but as a complex reality emerging out of forces like heredity, en-