who brings sweetness and light wherever he goes; comes off best of all. The film isn't racist, but primitivist; its hero played by a Kalahari native (credited phonetically as "N!xaw") is a stone age Charlie Chaplin, whose benign wisdom subtly underlines the craziness of the technologically superior "gods" around him. His desert is Eden; the charm of the movie is to make that believable. Jaime Uys, the Afrikaan film-maker, who wrote, produced, and directed *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, and 20th Century Fox, which released it here, deserve credit, not demonstrations for bringing N!xaw to us.

TOM O'BRIEN

(As of last issue, Tom O'Brien became Commonweal*'s regular movie critic.)*

Media

FEEDING OUR MYTHS

"TO SAVE OUR SCHOOLS" FLUNKS

IT WAS INEVITABLE. A year of reports about the crisis of American public schooling has culminated in a three-hour television special. Broadcast nationally on September 4, 1984, ABC's "To Save Our Schools, To Save Our Children" was the product of a year's research in four cities, and rounded up all the usual prestigious experts. It was, in large measure, a filmed version of *A Nation at Risk,* the report prepared by the National Commission on Excellence in Education; *Action for Excellence,* issued by the National Task Force on Education for Economic Growth; *Making the Grade,* from a Twentieth Century Fund Task Force; and *America's Competitive Challenge,* from the Business-Higher Education Forum. There were, however, some welcome differences: greater attention, for example, to the question of teachers' salaries and generally to the costs of improvements and the unlikelihood that they can be achieved without federal assistance. Also welcome was an emphasis on the threat of a two-tier system of schooling — one for the middle class and one for the poor (always shown, however, as black and Hispanic although the majority of America's poor are white). So too was its franker acknowledgment that society is speaking, as Ernest Boyer at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching puts it, "out of two sides of its mouth." Society demands that schools stick to "basics" — or, in the loftier version, to "academics" — while simultaneously relying on the school more than ever to be custodian and nurturer of children who increasingly lack other social sources of support. These departures from the written reports are distinctly for the better, and as a schoolteacher I suppose I should be comforted by all this attention. In reality, "To Save Our Schools" left me somewhere between a state of advanced discouragement and numb despair.

Each of the three segments — on students, on teachers, on community response was preceded by a barrage of dramatic and uninterrupted statistics, the kind intended to alarm rather than inform. From all three segments, however, we get a clear idea of who and what's to blame for today's educational difficulties:

- working mothers, who no longer maintain the "snugly intact" families of the fifties but have bought their freedom at the price "of children left alone";
- a hedonistic youth culture featuring drugs and outside distractions including TV;
- "frustrated and stressed" teachers, demoralized by these "unwilling-to-learn" students, plus low pay;
- the fight over segregation, which disrupted once tranquil schools;
- teachers' strikes and unionism, which has fostered mediocrity;
- "lowered standards."

Thanks to these factors, "our entire national future" is at stake. We are an "imperiled nation" and teaching is an "imperiled profession." We are witnessing the "twilight of excellence." The nation is being threatened by a split between the haves and have-nots of unprecedented proportions. Schools are no longer the common cement between citizens, lifting successive generations into the middle classes.

Each of these particulars could be challenged or at least seriously qualified. The vast majority of working mothers, for instance, are not out there to exercize their new-found freedom but because they must work for their families. The documentary's use of two upper-middle-class children mysteriously left to fend for themselves in their isolated suburban mansions, is a dubious way to build a case about the changing family. Furthermore, it might be interesting to ponder that those healthy teenagers of the fifties were the offspring of working women who manned our offices and factories during and shortly after World War II. And the young children raised by the stay-at-home mothers of the fifties grew up to be those spoiled and much-maligned kids of the sixties! Is it time for a moratorium on blaming women for not being there when they're needed? It's a subject guaranteed to create cheap guilt, not reflection and insight. (While the section on the changing family asserts a clearcut cause-and-effect connection between mothers working and children's lowered achievement, the relationship between TV-watching and achievement is presented in a nuanced and informative manner.)

The woes voiced by the teachers in "To Save Our Schools" ring true — but are they so new? The high-school English teacher's plea is heart-rending: if only they would "please look at me" with real interest. . . . But it is a refrain teachers have been chanting for generations. If teachers are burnt out now in alarming numbers, nothing we see here helps us understand why, nothing in their classrooms suggests the kind of breakdown of morale and discipline the documentary bemoans. The quick scenarios mostly show children working silently alone, dutifully listening, or acting as though they were. Yet, there is disorder in some classes. When was there not?

Neither the documentary nor the teachers interviewed — most of whom are leaving the profession — have any doubts that they are good teachers, although they leave me with some. The filmmakers seem to project the problems raised by these despairing teachers onto their unions, particularly in a long and unbalanced attack on the National Education Association. One wonders whether the status and burn-out rate of teachers are notably different in the school districts (one out of every four) without unions.

The documentary also creates something of a double bind when it warns, on the one hand, against a two-tier educational system and then, on the other hand, traces so many school problems to the turmoil surrounding integration, which was, after all, an effort to alter the race-based and class-based schooling that was long the norm. The film refers to the former glories of Kansas City's Southwest High, once the best in the city and not coincidentally located in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. Integration and the accompanying difficulties drove out thousands of its usual clientele and replaced them with thousands of lower-income and minority students. That may have changed Southwest High but, as the commentator notes, it also increased the number of black students going to college and aspiring to professions. Is this a tale of educational decline, or success — or both? The diagnosis, with its nearly Marxist focus on broad social ills, is dramatic but questionable. The prescription — more standardized tests for students, competency exams for teachers, perhaps better pay for all teachers but certainly merit pay for some — is predictable and paltry. If we are to seek solutions in the schools rather than society at large, then we need to know more about schools than this TV documentary offers. It feeds our shallowest myths and nostalgia, but fails to look closely and carefully at what actually happens in classrooms and why teaching might be exciting. To reform our schools we need to know them better.

The hero of ABC's portrayal of Southwest High is an amiable, appealing middle-class white student. His old junior high school buddies are no longer with him — they went to private schools. They keep asking him, he laughingly tells us, whether Southwest isn't a "dangerous place," and of course it isn't, he keeps telling them, but they're hard to convince. They are badly misinformed. By whom?

His situation is familiar. How often have people gaped in amazement when I told them I taught in Harlem, and my children attended largely minority inner-city schools. They imagined us daily fighting off violence. Yet in sixteen years of working in a variety of inner-city Manhattan schools, I've never witnessed serious violence against adults. This is surely a matter of luck, but it also suggests that such violence is not a daily part of the scene. (Where does the nightmare picture come from, and what harm is perpetrated by it?)

Actually several recent polls reveal reserves of positive feeling toward public schools on the part of both parents and teachers, belying both ABC's view and the common myths. But even more striking is the way people who have children in public schools view that system more favorably than people who don't — and view their children's own schools more positively than the "other schools" out there. Indeed, I sometimes regret how positively!

A part of teachers' despair comes from the way schools are perceived by the public — including their friends and relatives — and the teacher's association with a failing, violence-ridden system.

The absence of any historical perspective, so noticeable in "To Save Our Schools," is surely another major part of the problem. Our own memories are selective, especially when they reach back to a time when most Americans did not expect to graduate from high school. Were the graduates who went into teaching from state normal colleges a generation ago the "brightest and the best"? How much did the quality and retention of teachers depend on the absence of other options for young women? Were teachers in the 1950s afflicted with fewer or more nonacademic and demeaning tasks — lunch duty, hall patrol, etc.? What happened to poor teachers before unionization? Was there once a "common" education for all? The split between the able and the others, between rich and poor is not new. Certainly by high school the two-tier system was always operative. Rereading old biographies and novels can be a healthy reminder of the disobedience, unruliness, and even violence that existed in the schools of yore. Try even the sweetly nostalgic series by Laura Ingalls Wilder for a taste of what teachers had to contend with in many American communities.

Divided into segments on students, teachers, and community response, "To Save Our Schools" never manages to focus on the life of classrooms themselves, on the curriculum and on the teaching. Some children speak but largely to repeat the adults' themes. We're shown a few really sad and confused students, the kind that existed when I began teaching just as they do now. A teacher's efforts to make a young black boy pronounce "ask" according to standard American pronunciation (instead of "aks") is an unintentional reminder of how schools add to children's fearful confusion about their own worth and about the value of education. The faces of the children in Class 44, who have not had a regular teacher all year, living off an endless succession of substitutes, provide perhaps the most haunting memory. That one sequence might have justified the whole three hours.

Perhaps one reason the filmmakers do not dwell on classroom life is because they can't imagine it could be interesting, and suspect the rest of us can't either; perhaps also because we can only tell good classrooms from bad classrooms by their standardized test scores. Otherwise we don't know what to look for. It is precisely such circumstances that lend tests their awesome power to mindlessly determine both curriculum and teaching methods, Prepackaged programs with detailed test-directed scripts are increasingly attractive to a public ignorant of school realities and seeking guaranteed improvements. It is a trend that reports like this unwittingly encourage.

If the biggest problem is attracting the brightest and the best into teaching, we can't wait to solve the family crisis, nor to eliminate youth culture or TV. We could, however, try to communicate why teaching and the life of the classroom can be

compelling. Teaching can be a profession of immense variety, autonomy, community, and a sense of usefulness, a setting in which one's own interests are valued — because it is from the stuff of one's own interests that teaching at its best emerges.

Rarely are there moments in this film which capture, even in passing, what might make teaching and schools wonderful and interesting. Granted such teaching is not an everyday event in most places, but it does occur, and a discerning film is needed to give this to us. For unless we can hold this alternative reality, even temporarily, in our heads, we have no capacity for substantial change.

DEBORAH MEIER

(Deborah Meier is founder and principal of Central Park East School, a special public elementary school in East Harlem.)

Books: A NEW OXFORD ETHIC

REASONS AND PERSONS
Derek Parfit
Oxford/Clarendon Press, $29.95, 543 pp.

Frederick Ferré

THIS is a book of ideas, but it begins as a pleasant physical experience. The book's size, its weighty feel, its good binding and clear typography all commend it. So, on thumbing through, does the carefully prepared scholarly apparatus: a five-page analytical table of contents, ten appendices, twenty-eight pages of notes, a rich bibliography, and an index. Perhaps the most arresting initial impression is made by the photograph on the cover of the dust jacket, showing a boat setting out from harbor in the misty dawn. It is the author's own photography, and it expresses his philosophical enterprise, also captured in an epigraph by Nietzsche placed opposite the title page:

> At last the horizon appears free to us again, even granted that it is not bright; at last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our sea*, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea."

What Derek Parfit wants in this book is to make a new beginning for ethics, venturing out, in the radical absence of religious authority, to find a reasonable replacement for our civilization's conceptions of what we persons are and what principles should guide our private and communal lives. In the course of his argument he rejects not only religious dogma, which on the whole he considers not worth discussing, but also the secular orthodoxies of self-interest theories, which he discusses at length and in detail.

The genius of this book is indeed in its detail. Parfit's style of reasoning is at the same time elaborate, rigorous, and highly imaginative. Unfortunately, sometimes, especially early in the book, he gets trapped in his own over-complex style of reasoning, which typically embeds multiple conditionals and negatives, e.g., "Since this is so, it cannot be true that we will cause these aims to be best achieved only if we do not follow this theory." And on at least two occasions he inadvertently reverses his meaning by using what, in context, turns out to be one "not" too many, e.g. "If we are not Consequentialists, we shall be likely to believe that Clare's act would not have been not wrong." I was inclined at the start to come down rather hard on such needless obfuscation, and I remain afraid that many readers will give up somewhere in the first fifty pages.

That would, however, be a shame. There are riches upon riches for those who persevere. The principal benefit, besides the sheer mental enlargement that comes from considering Parfit's profusion of fascinating hypothetical examples (more entertaining than most science fiction), is the massive and, in my judgment, conclusive assault on self-interest as the presumed "only reasonable" policy for individuals and societies. Parfit shows from several angles that it is not always reasonable to do what is "best for you." He deftly handles various forms of Prisoner's Dilemma problems and expands them to the level of society at large. The implications for public policy with regard to pollution, population, and war are made abundantly clear. If policy-makers the world over could be convinced by this book, we would have grounds to hope for a safer future.

Another intimately related issue is the question of what persons are. Selfishness as the ultimate policy for life is made even more unreasonable if selves are themselves shown not to be ultimates. Parfit's extended treatment of personal identity is aimed at destroying the belief that there is some "further fact" about us (a soul, or the like) that matters in addition to the tapestry of physical and psychological relations that constitute us. This is where he employs his fecund imagination best of all, with profusions of thought-experiments that must finally lay the Cartesian ghost to rest. He calls his view the Reductionist position, which I find an unfortunate label; but I think the position correct. It is, as he notes, the Buddha's view, and it is the view taken by "process" philosophers who follow Alfred North Whitehead's account of things.

It is frustrating that Oxford philosophers like Parfit tend to have so few resources beyond the range of their normal conversation-partners and such a narrow repertoire in the history of philosophy. Parfit is immensely ingenious, but his palette of philosophical options is limited. He discusses time, for example, without seeming aware that there are many more important options than he considers. Is the "passage" of time across events merely an illusion, he asks, or does it really pass? On neither option can he see why there is any moral difference between future events, not yet