Editorial

Values Undermining Values

When they assert, on the contrary, that "hell is ourselves," savage peoples give us a lesson in humility which, it is to be hoped, we may still be capable of understanding. In the present century, when man is actively destroying countless living forms, after wiping out so many societies whose wealth and diversity had, from time immemorial, constituted the better part of his inheritance, it has probably never been more necessary to proclaim, as do the myths, that sound humanism does not begin with oneself, but puts the world before life, life before man, and respect for others before self-interest: and that no species, not even our own, can take the fact of having been on this earth for one or two million years—since, in any case, man's stay here will one day come to an end—as an excuse for appropriating the world as if it were a thing and behaving on it with neither decency nor discretion.

Claude Lévi-Strauss
The Origin of Table Manners, 1968

I was recently in attendance at an elementary school music and dance assembly in one of the towns close to San Francisco Bay. The performers were drummers from the Caribbean, and a dancer. Bringing musicality, grace and rhythmic movement, an opportunity for children to become acquainted with and to appreciate another people and their art, the performance carried some values which most persons would agree are humane: music, dance, multi-culturality, respite from routine, some realization that there are still qualities in the ancient drum not yet totally displaced by the very most recent hi-tech product. Most of us want our children to adopt and live out such values. At the same time, however, there were other less humane values imparted to the watching and listening youngsters when, showing one of the drums and in dialogue with his young audience, one of the performers taught that the covering of the drum was of animal skin, of the skin of a goat used after the goat had been "killed so its meat could be eaten." For most, perhaps all, of the children in attendance and for the teachers, such a lesson would likely cause no discomfort. None was evident. But for those of us who are animal liberationists, to have a program in the schools so take for granted the status quo vis-à-vis the treatment of animals must be disquieting, for we will see in it an inhumaneness which reinforces an unquestioning outlook upon animals and their treatment, an outlook which it may be is the root reason why the humane surface values of such a performance do not take sufficiently deep hold within our societies. "Mankind's true moral test," writes Milan Kundera in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, "is its fundamental test (which lies deeply buried from view), consists of its attitude towards those who are at its mercy: animals. And in this respect mankind has suffered a fundamental debacle, a debacle so fundamental that all others stem from it."

If we could achieve a synthesis of the humaneness meant in such designations as "humane letters" or "the humanities" with the meaning in "humanitarian" and then especially with the meaning of humaneness as understood by humane societies, more of the debacles of humankind, such as the Gulf crisis, might possibly be avoided. Such a synthesis of course would include the recognition of the rights of animals. Schweitzer made a supreme effort to achieve such a synthesis. A man of letters, master of many arts, a humanitarian willing to put his beliefs to the service of others, and author of the philosophy of reverence for life, Schweitzer aimed at nothing less than the preservation (or creation) of civilization; hence his work from the early 1920's, The Philosophy of Civilization, in which is set forth the philosophy of reverence for life.

Some of these different meanings of "humane" coincided also in the origins of the child protection and animal protection movements.
The required elements of the synthesis have become radically separated, however, during the mid- and late years of the century, with only the development of the animal liberation/rights movement during the past fifteen years offering hope that such a synthesis might again be approached. How far matters still stand from the synthesis we seek was indicated by my own experience when a few years ago I approached the California Council for the Humanities for funds with which to organize a conference on “The Humanities in Humane Education.” Of persons present at the meeting, only Steven Fisher, maker of prize winning films on environmental topics, could see that (as he adamantly put it) the idea “was a natural” for any group responsible for the societal role of the humanities.

“Yes,” writes Kundera, “the right to kill a deer or a cow is the only thing all of mankind can agree upon, even during the bloodiest of wars.” Until this inhumane contract is broken, the deep source of humankind’s debacles will continue typically to be present in just those supposedly humanizing vehicles of culture which shape majority sentiment. But at present, besides the human costs, immense damage has been done (with more destruction in the offing) to the environment in the Middle East. Many of the animals in Kuwait’s zoo have been eaten or maimed. Camels were shot in their knees to prevent them from wandering onto air strips.

The way back to civilization, wrote Schweitzer, lies through reverence for life. Let those of us who are not religious call it respect for life, if we must, but let us secure its place in the meaning of “humane.”

John Stockwell

Correction

In the Spring 1990 issue the title of Evelyn Pluhar’s article was wrongly given as “Reason and Reality Revisited.” The correct title is “Reason and Morality Revisited.”

On page 67 of the same issue, in the second paragraph, the text should read “If, as David Hume has claimed, reason alone can compel no action....”

Mary Sternberg