

Concerning the Matter of Choice

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THE THEORY which I am about to expound is based on the premise that the great majority of human beings, when given a choice between pain and painlessness, will choose to avoid the pain whatever the degree. That when faced with a choice between the accomplishment of a task at the expense of a less amount of labor than he has been accustomed to, the average human would choose the less laborious means, even though there might be other value factors involved. That if he could accomplish a journey with greater speed than had been previously possible, he would choose the means which delivered him at his destination most expeditiously, provided there was no significant sacrifice in the way of comfort involved. That if the choice was offered between luxury and austerity, he would choose the luxurious.

The list could be extended without adding to the persuasiveness of the argument, but the final and most significant point has to do with the choice between life and death and with the prolongation of life. Of course

there are exceptions which can easily be pointed out, even in the matter of life and death and longevity, but I feel certain that the premise is an essentially sound one. It would even seem that the impulses or instincts which lead the average human to make choices in these directions are inherent, and form a basic component of the behavior of all animals. At the bottom is the instinct of self-preservation, and tied in with it is the instinct which leads to the choice of the pleasant and comfortable over the disagreeable.

So, the choices which I have indicated seem to me to be not only to be expected, but sensible ones to make as well. When confronted with the opportunity none will hesitate to choose that which is pleasant, or to postpone death as long as possible; to do so is human, and in all probability instinctive as well, a tropism which the naturalist would insist was as integral a part of human behavior akin to that power which forces the moth into the flame.

I first pondered on these matters when

a friend trained in science spoke of some discovery which promised to extend the span of human life considerably, and he hailed this as a great step forward. This seemed to be a difficult conclusion to refute, but one could not but see that if the new device accomplished all that it promised, it would add substantially to the present difficulties attendant on the population explosion. Here is a dilemma with which the scientist does not like to be faced, and since the proposal of which my friend spoke was but the latest in a whole series which have already upset nature's balance to the point where some sort of corrective steps must be taken, perhaps it was not a particularly sensible point for me to have raised. But of our group, several, in fact the majority, agreed with me that the issue was a real one that had to be faced, and this our scientific friend could not deny. But rather than defend his position which no doubt he was qualified to do, he chose to attack, and heatedly he turned on me and said:

Who are you to talk? Would you refuse to accept the benefits of science? Did not you go to the hospital recently and there have an operation performed which could not have been accomplished without the new methods and techniques? And if you had not thus taken advantage of the powers of science and technology would you not now be dead?

And he had me there, for though I succeeded in having the last word in pointing out that in this particular case I made no choice at all for I was not in any condition to decide, I did not satisfactorily answer his question. I had no real victory and I knew it; and so I started thinking.

Something is wrong in these days and the passing of time emphasizes the seriousness of the predicament in which modern civilization finds itself. The problems of over-population are mortal, but this is but

one small part of the whole dilemma. To control human population in the face of an ever declining death rate presupposes that human controls will be substituted for the natural controls which have up until recently kept this aspect of nature in balance. Moreover it is getting late, and no time is now left in which to shilly-shally about. In certain parts of the world the situation is acute and the problem worsens, not in arithmetic but in geometrical proportion. So something must be done and since it was man who stopped death, it will now have to be man who stops life in an effort to regain the balance. The answer ordinarily given is that the voluntary control of birth will provide the solution. This, of course, is a hope, and to many tough-minded persons amounts to nothing more than wishful thinking. Thus the issue seems to fall between the stools of starvation by droves, or enforced birth control. A nasty choice to have to make.

But this particular imbalance, the discussion of which grew naturally enough out of a conversation among friends, is but one of many critical situations which have resulted from the takeover of nature by science and technology. Certain situations which now face humanity and which cannot be allowed to continue if life is to endure on this planet, are familiar to all of us. Or at least we have a casual familiarity with them, although I doubt if anyone, except those few who presume to make this sort of thing their special province, are willing to admit to the seriousness of the situation. The whole scientific hierarchy seems to be cursed with a maudlin optimism which is induced, no doubt, by an unwillingness to admit to error. The philosopher Eliseo Vivas has said:

My quarrel with the naturalists, I came clearly to see, is the quarrel of a man radically opposed to the present drift of historical events and therefore

unsympathetic with those who employ their talents in the manufacture of an apologetic for the direction of contemporary history. I would not for a minute pretend solidarity with men who do not realize that one of the essential marks of decency today is to be ashamed of being a man of the twentieth century.

Assuredly we find ourselves in a mess, and those who are responsible have not got the guts to acknowledge the seriousness of radiational pollution; that the birth of human monsters in ever increasing numbers is certain to result from our atomic energy activities; that drugs, detergents, fertilizers, pesticides, all are polluting our environment to a degree which exceeds the visible and perceptible pollution of air and water of which we cannot help but be aware. Nevertheless, without dissent, the modern day Dr. Panglosses insist that all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

But to get back to the questions raised by my friend's rather bitter pronouncement that I was alive instead of dead, thanks to technology and science. On the face of it, the questions raised are not debatable, but it seemed to me that they had to be. We may be caught up in a current the strength of which permits no change or allows no return, but it cannot be accepted that this situation is one concerning which civilization has had no choice. To me it is obvious that there had to be a choice, and since the answer is not to be found in the choices humans make concerning pain, comfort, ease and longevity, it must be looked for elsewhere.

The crux of the matter, I decided, lies not in the making of the individual choice, but in the opportunity to make the choice. If one has the opportunity to choose between an operation with an anesthetic and one without, unless he is an idiot he will choose anesthesia. But in doing what he

could hardly help but do he lost something important concerning his status as a noble human being.

In one of Melville's South Seas tales, "Omoo" or "Typee," I forget which, a native has had his leg crushed to the extent that it either must be cut off, or death from gangrene will ensue. Melville gives us an eyewitness account of the amputation, accomplished with primitive tools, and, as I remember it, without any fuss on the part of the amputee, in spite of the fact that he was fully conscious the whole time. Such demonstrations of fortitude as this are no longer necessary, of course, and my remarks here are not to be construed as any argument in favor of the abolition of anesthetics, but will not the most squeamish concede that there is a point to be made in that with the refinement of the techniques in combatting pain, the human animal has lost something admirable? Is not fortitude one aspect of human nobility along with courage, and does not the pampering of the senses to the extent that all that is unpleasant or painful must be avoided, lead to decisions which are morally indefensible?

The significant point is that in Melville's story, he who underwent the operation had no choice to make except between evanescent pain and certain death, a choice that every beaver makes when he chews off his foot in order to escape from the trap in which he is caught. Here again there are a host of illustrations to draw upon which show that human endeavor since the Middle Ages, abetted by science and technology, has been in the direction of offering to man the opportunities to make choices which were not previously available to him, and of these a large part seem to be concerned with the amplification of the material aspects of life, choices which result from the extension of man's power over nature. One no longer endures pain; nor does he

walk when he can ride, ride when he can fly, nor work either with his brains or muscles, if a machine can be devised to do it for him.

But the point is that the determination to devise these means for widening the scope of comfort and physical ease is not a fundamental part of man's essential nature, but develops rather out of a materialistic philosophy which Western civilization adopted as a matter of deliberate choice. Naturalistic philosophy which is the determining governor of our times may assume the credit for all the benefits (if in truth they be benefits), of science and medicine, but at the same time it must assume the responsibility for the disintegration of our society and the destruction of our environment. Thus we can see, if we have the courage to look, that the tacit assumption that the extraordinary widening of the scope of human choice made possible by science is desirable, is most certainly open to question. Once the opportunity of choice is possible, inevitably the direction will be toward greater ease, or pleasure, or comfort, or however we choose to designate it.

I use the adverb "inevitably" fully aware of the fact that adverbs are dangerous words to use, and that I have not by any means demonstrated the fact that the choices I am speaking of are inevitable. But I would think that few would disagree with me. For my part, I should not be able to resist the choices of which I speak, and would be willing to go along with everyone else in insisting that one who refused the use of an anesthetic, for example, was insane. But the point we must face is that in making comparisons between travel by horse conveyance versus travel by automobile, it cannot be demonstrated that the latter is preferable except in terms of its own use. What I mean is, if no one had an automobile, none would be deprived by the lack,

and the dreams which the non-auto world might dream of a more speedy means of travel would be inspired by a whole set of dubious assumptions. Again I use the word "dubious" deliberately, for it must be apparent to all that the disadvantages of the automobile, if viewed abstractly, outweigh the advantages. The death toll and health toll and the congestion and proliferation of highways need not be gone into here by way of supporting my remarks. What is bound to happen though is that most people will not be able to make the mental adjustment necessary before any comparison of a non-auto world can be made with the present day.

We were presented with the choice to have or have-not the automobile, and now only the most eccentric can make the choice against its use; even those who refuse to learn to drive will ride with others or make other use of the internal combustion engine; there is no escape. In the same way we cannot possibly resist the use of the miracles of modern medicine. In fact it is here in this field that the defenders of the status quo find their most convincing arguments; it is assumed that there can be no question raised as to the advantage of these humanitarian advances, and thus we return to my operation and to Melville's noble cannibal.

Once science has offered an escape from the cholera or spotted fever or has devised ways for removing or transplanting vital organs as a means of extending life, none of us can refuse the choice which is now available to us, and no dispassionate view of the human values involved can be possible as long as the choice is actually before us. We seem not to connect the elimination of cholera with the population explosion, or the elimination of lice and ticks and flies with the deadly persistence of DDT, or the advantages of X-ray with the incidence of cancer, and so forth. But what is perhaps

the strangest part of the whole business is the apparent assumption that the postponement of death is both possible and desirable, without any consideration at all being given to the quantitative aspect of the problem. How long shall life be extended? By extension of the logic which makes any prolongation desirable, why not forever? And how long is forever? And who is to decide who will live forever and who will not, for obviously all cannot. For more on this particular form of idiocy, see "The Immortalist," by Alan Harrington.

All of these questions and problems are of present and vital interest, but they are not directly pertinent to this discussion. The matter which concerns us here has to do with the confusion which results from the necessity which directs our choices, which all admit to be desirable as well as inevitable, and the moral and physical deterioration to which these choices are leading us. Here the confusion results from the fact that the trouble, while it arises directly from the choices we make, is not to be attributed to the choices themselves, but to the fact that we are presented with a variety of choices to make. To put it more simply, it is not the choices we make, for they are inevitable, it is the spread of alternatives which science and technology have made available to us which are at the root of the problem. We can now choose to stay alive whereas in the past we had no choice but to die.

Once this situation is made clear, a major step forward has been taken. Discussions which hitherto resolved themselves in the end to questions of whether or not we want to reverse the trend of history, now may be seen to lie within another realm entirely, though a no less troublesome one. Scorn for the horse and buggy days was ordinarily all it took to end the argument. But if we see clearly now that the trend which must be faced as being degenerative results

from the values and desires which motivate Western civilization, those who call for a halt can no longer be silenced by scornful references to what Pater called "the fallacy of the enchanted distance." The apologists for technology must face the moral issues involved, and while the conflict between the material values of science and the spiritual values of the inner life have been variously recognized, all the attempts at reconciliation have failed; as in fact they are bound to fail.

The assumption that the progressive force of industrialization and urbanization, the proliferation of material objects, the satisfying of physical appetites, the lust for power over nature, represent man at his most intelligent point cannot stand up under scrutiny. To believe this one must believe that there are no people on the globe as intelligent and wise as are we of the civilization of the West. Thus we must scorn as inferior, deficient in wit and cleverness and knowledge, all those who lived in the past as well as those who at the present moment represent a majority of humans now alive. We must assume that the civilizations in India or Africa or Asia which we term "backward" result from lack of intelligence and wisdom on the part of the people.

Thus it becomes the mission of the West to industrialize those whom we condescendingly regard as underprivileged. We must send them synthetics which will poison their vegetation and waters, factories which substitute servitude to machines for dignified craftsmanship, medicines which evoke the specter of starvation, and Alka Seltzer with which to calm the resulting flutterings in the solar plexus. It is high time that some wise person should step across the border into Mexico and make a comparative study of the changes which have been wrought by industrialization upon the simple lives of the rural Indians, whose

privation-ridden existences were calm and productive and dignified before circumstances forced them into the slums of the city. With my own eyes I have seen the unutterable slums on the outskirts of Lima in Peru, where the Indians, descendants of the proud Incas, huddle together in complete physical and moral degradation. These are the ones who have been offered the privilege of the choice; those others who because of their complete isolation have not had the choice presented to them, still live in dignity in the remote mountain valleys of the Andes.

But let me return to the statement I previously made to the effect that the acceptance of science and technology was not the result of something fundamental in human nature. Western civilization turned in this direction as a matter of a deliberate choice; a choice that turns out to have been an evil one. Again I cannot pursue an interesting sideline here, but the choice made, I must insist, was the same as the one made by Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, and if a term should be sought to characterize this Western civilization of which I am speaking, it would be appropriate to call it "Faustian." In fact, the tragedy of Dr. Faustus is an allegorical representation indicating or foretelling the fate of modern man. Or so I take it to be.

Let me illustrate my point by referring to a talk I once gave before a group of people who were interested in gardening. As I remember it the title of my discourse was "Not to Poison is Not Enough," and I attempted to show that the use of poisonous pesticides did not represent progress, even omitting any discussion of all the as yet undetermined side effects of the poisons on human beings. Rather the use of them in the garden was a symptom of a disease of civilization which might be termed "technologisis." I drew attention to the fact that the Greeks had invented the steam engine

two centuries before Christ, but that which later became the god of Western civilization was regarded by them as an amusing toy.

At this point I was interrupted by one of the audience who pointed out in terms and intonations which were both scornful and condescending, that the reason the Greeks did not seize upon the machine was because they had slaves. This is the type of thinking which characterizes the philosophical descendants of William of Occam and Francis Bacon. In fact it is not thinking at all, it is an example of the use of untenable conclusions in support of that which has been accepted as dogma on the part of the naturalists. I shall not do more here in refutation than quote from a very wise man, Siegfried Giedion, who says in "Mechanization Takes Command":

If the Greeks did not find an adequate explanation of movement, if they did not reduce it to its exact logical terms, it was not because they were incapable, but because of their fundamental view of the cosmos. They lived in a world of eternal ideas, a world of constants . . . the ancients had cheap labor at their disposal in the form of slaves. But this fails to explain why they did not apply their knowledge practically; did not use their rails to speed the vehicles on their highways; used their automatons to dispense consecrated water and did not commercialize them for selling beverages; did not put to everyday use their facility with vacuum, air pressure and mechanical contrivances.

(For a more detailed account of this whole discussion, see "The Technological Society" by Jacques Ellul.)

But come back to the matter of choice, so that we may end where we started out. The choices which with frightening acceleration are available to us now, each new one, whether it be to embark on travel to the moon or harness the energy of the atom, represent a further victory in man's con-

quest of nature and this we accept as being progress. These are steps toward a materialistic utopia wherein all of mankind will eventually possess complete freedom from fear, from competition, from hunger, or from oppression; every whim or wish in the direction of self-gratification will immediately be granted, there will be no pain, and eventually death itself will be conquered.

When thus reduced to its obvious conclusion the materialistic doctrine is too stupid to be taken seriously, but this is what we have, and we are stuck with it. We no longer enjoy the right to choose that which, being of the spirit, might strengthen our nobler attributes. With obloquy in the eyes of the gods, we are condemned to proceed in the direction of further degradation, because the only choices technology offers us are choices which it is not possible for us to refuse to make.

What it takes to understand the world in which the Greeks lived, or that of our predecessors who lived in Europe before the twelfth century, most of us do not possess, but worse than this is that our leaders, almost without exception, have nothing but scorn and ridicule to heap on those who would question any of the aspects of the humanistic dogma. Well, so be it, but it is here in this matter of the proliferation of science and technology that the answers to the questions of choice are to be found. All of the ills with which we are now plagued,

ills whose every mounting numbers are catalogued daily in the papers and over the airwaves, result from decisions which we now have no choice but to make.

In spite of the most convincing protestations of good will and benevolence, each day finds us deeper in the morass, with honor but a quaint memory, and morality rejected by church and state alike. So we are lost; but I would hope that in some resurgence of decency and gallantry we would finally admit to the reality of our plight. The hippies or the beatniks, or whatever is the proper term to apply to those of today's youth who scorn the world of which they are an unwilling part, have perceived the truth, but for the most part they seem not to be able to reject the philosophies which underlie the degradation which they find to be unendurable. That they will ever understand seems to be too much to expect as long as they reject all of history and of wisdom as well. If they but could bring themselves to do it, they might find guides to the reestablishment of choices based on ethical and spiritual values in the study of ancient civilizations and of contemporary civilizations other than our own.

But it seems to me that they may be on the right track. Once they discover that neither filth nor drugs nor violence nor contempt will advance their cause, they may make progress. That this may be so is my fervent hope.