Man's Sense of Value

Value and Values in Evolution, edited by Edward Maziarz, *New York: Gordon and Breach, 1979. ix + 196 pp.*

To CELEBRATE the centenary of Chicago's Loyola University, a distinguished group of scholars met to discuss the evolution of values in our increasingly secular American culture. The group included Mircea Eliade, Viktor Frankl, Leonard Meyer, Gyorgy Kepes, Nicholas Reicher, and Emmanuel Levinas; along with a number of other essays, what they had to say is gathered together in this book. The collection is of high quality and makes for stimulating reading, and with the disappointing exception of Eliade's essay, the authors directly address the problem of human valuation. Despite the book's title, however, none of the authors considers the problem of value as such. The oversight is perhaps symptomatic of the very problem that these men were addressing on this occasion, and most certainly supports the point made by Eliseo Vivas some years ago when he noted that ours is an age that is "instinct with a hatred of values." To ignore the problem of values, while focusing instead on the problem of valuation, is to proffer an axiology that stands on the whimsey of personal preference and happenstance. Of course, the men who gathered at Loyola University on this occasion were not there to discuss value theory, but the fragments they threw out from time to time point to the need for a more thoroughgoing study.

Contemporary Western man will continue to wallow in confusion about what is right, good, and beautiful as long as he remains convinced that he is the source of these qualities which have, as a consequence, no independent status. It is not self-evident, in this regard, that, because values depend upon man for their existence, they have no Being independent of man and his creativity. At the center of any discussion of value lies the question of the objectivity of value, which is not to be confused—as it is this collection—with the separate problem of how values come to be recognized and espoused. This confusion leads this reader to thoughts about what these writers have neglected to say while allowing room for acknowledgement that what they do say is important and instructive. This point might come clearer if we turn directly to several of the essays.

In the final paragraph of Meyer's otherwise exceptional essay he makes the claim that the arts are "superior amusement," by which he means they are more entertaining than non-arts. As Meyer puts it, "Beethoven is more relevant—more entertaining—than Baez." The use of a relative term like "entertaining," for some reason taken as synonymous with "relevant," is symptomatic. What Meyer does not point out is that Beethoven is quite simply better than Baez. Why does a thinker of Meyer's status and background shy away from such value judgments? Classical music incorporates greater value than popular or folk music, and it is for this reason that it is "more entertaining," if indeed it is. Beethoven is more valuable than Baez precisely because there is more in one of Beethoven's creations for the spectator to get his aesthetic teeth into. Classical music requires an effort of the imagination which is not required of merely entertaining, popular music. Entertainment presupposes no sophistication whatever on the part of a merely passive audience, which is precisely why it is popular. Art, on the other hand, requires active spectator participation both intellectually and emotionally. As Meyer himself has noted in another essay, following Dewey and Vivas, art requires an aesthetic "transaction" between the work and the spectator. When the appropriate response occurs, it is a result of the fact that values take up residence in a work of art and these values *require* our response. This is a gestalt quality of aesthetic objects that any sensitive spectator can attest to as a result of a single aesthetic experience.

Despite this confusion it pays to pick one's way through Meyer's essay because it does enlighten. His thesis is that contemporary man confronts a dilemma of choice

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that arises from too many alternatives coupled with "neither a coherent vision of the future, nor faith in the traditions of the past." Meyer sees in the music of John Cage—music which embodies the precept of "action the outcome of which is not forseen"—our current crisis in microcosm. As Meyer notes, though, there is a profound problem here because "without some sort of constraints, choice is impossible. Creativity lies in the area between rigid restraint and unrestricted license." If Meyer had followed this tantalizing line of thought, he would have seen value lurking in the shadows.

Another essay in the collection, by Frankl, echoes Meyer's conclusions. Frankl, however, seems to find in a unified vision of mankind, which he calls "monanthropism," a path that will enable twentieth-century man to escape the labyrinth of a meaningless, valueless existence. In the course of drawing this conclusion Frankl notes that mankind's escape can come only by self-transcendence.

> Man is characterized by his "search for meaning" rather than his "search for himself." Just as self-actualization can be obtained only on a detour, namely, through meaning fulfillment, likewise identity is available only through responsibility, through being responsible for the fulfillment of meaning.

We shall return to this suggestion in a moment.

Perhaps the best essay in the collection, from the point of view of suggestions about the nature of value, is that of Kepes. He follows the same line of thought as that of Frankl and of Meyer, but he has a great deal more to say by way of concrete suggestion about the nature of value. The new unity sought by Kepes is one of man with man and man with his "natural and man-made environment," since only such a unity can provide a new focus of meaning, "an 'ecological climax,' a dwelling for the human spirit not unlike the dimly remembered Garden of Eden to which advancing knowledge now beckons us to return." The artist, says Kepes, will show us the way, since he is "regaining [his] long lost role of cultural leadership."

Even the most cynical of readers must hope that Kepes and Frankl are right. But one wonders whether the hope for "a sense of continuity with the natural environment and oneness with our social world" is merely pious, a romantic harkening back to a simpler mode of existence, or whether it is grounded on reason. To be sure, Kepes is on the right track as he looks beyond man to the realm of values for direction and focus. The question we must ask, however, is whether he looks far enough. Apparently Kepes finds in man himself and in man's creations the source of values that can provide a focus and an escape from our meaningless existence. Frankl, following a similar train of thought, advocates a sense of responsibility to man, to the other. "It is responsibility which constitutes Man and which is the source of values," echoes Levinas in the concluding essay. But we must beware of traps and pitfalls in going the way of what is quite simply a "humanistic" ethic, since the current crisis of value arises precisely because of man's preoccupation with self and attendant presumption of self-sufficiency. Gabriel Marcel warned twenty years ago of the danger of autolotry that lies in a shallow relativism devoid of any sense of mystery, any recognition of our own limitations, and any commitment to Transcendent Being. Marcel only echoes the Greeks in a more modern idiom.

Any student of history knows that a humanistic ethic that finds in man the source of value (rather than the espouser of values that have status in being independent of man) easily passes into arrogance and hubris; it fails to provide a criterion for selecting between human things that are valuable and human things that are not valuable. To be more specific, men are not inherently good or evil, though they are capable of either. To make man himself, rather than those qualities he sometimes strives to produce, the center of a value system is to confuse the bearer with the thing borne. If twentieth-century Western man is to loosen the stranglehold

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of a meaningless existence, he must avoid the temptation to turn himself into an object of worship; he is not worthy of it. Man's duty is to "the moral law within," as with Kant; or to God, as with religious thinkers; or to Value as such. A humanistic ethic that centers on man is nothing more than a crypto-relativism that floats on circumstance and necessarily delivers less than it promises because all things human are decidedly not valuable.

Edward Maziarz, who collected the essays for this book, speaks in his preface about a shared "presupposition" among the participants that "reason needs to be abetted and supported by the vision of hope." As a matter of fact, aside from Kepes, perhaps, hope is not a presupposition of any of these writers. If my analysis is at all accurate, the humanism they preach does not allow for hope in a room crowded with mirrors.

Men do not create values and values do not evolve. Values are recognized and espoused; they possess us through a mist of prejudice, ignorance, insensitivity, and blind passion. If generosity, benevolence, charity, and compassion are valuable they are so whether or not we practice them and despite the fact that we quarrel about them. Our sense of values changes, to be sure, as do our perspective and our responsiveness. But this is data for the anthropologist or the sociologist. The philosopher must see beyond the peculiar, fortuitous circumstances of lived experience to that which does (or does not) make human experience worthwhile. And in this sense this collection of essays lacks a philosophical dimension. To say this is to note the book's only serious flaw, however. With the exception of a few of the essays that contribute little to the debate, this collection is lively, thought-provoking, and of high quality. It deserves the serious attention of a wide circle of readers, as it is certainly a book for our time—both in what it includes and in what it does not.

Reviewed by HUGH MERCER CURTLER