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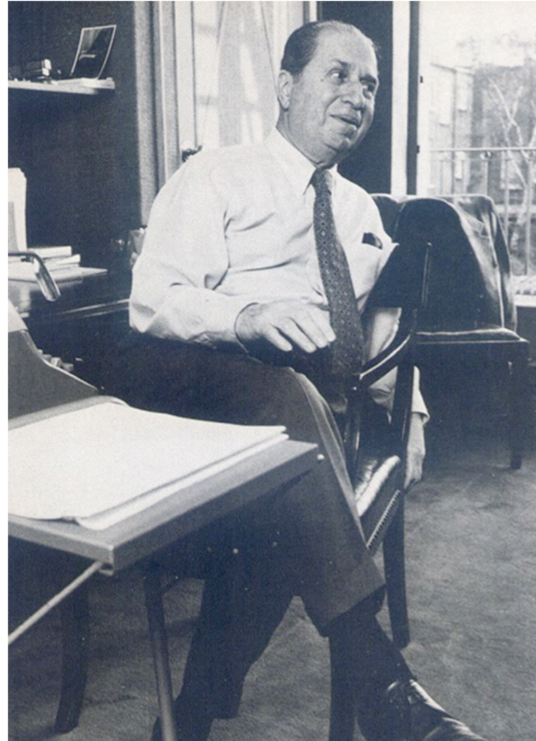

IN TWENTY-FIVE YEARS: THE HUMAN CONSTANT AND THE CHANGING SCENE

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Part I of 2

I. *INTRODUCTION*

At 10 o'clock on the morning of July 2 in the year 1950, I delivered the opening lecture at the newly founded Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. The Goethe Festival had successfully initiated music and thought at Aspen the previous summer—in fact so successfully that Walter Paepcke decided to make the intellectual and musical performance a permanent Aspen institution and so created the Aspen Institute. Since the Institute was dedicated to humanistic studies—to the study of man and of human values in relation to all aspects of human life—it seemed

appropriate to choose the nature of man as the theme for this opening lecture.

The central thesis of that lecture was that man differs from all other animals and everything else on earth, not in degree, but in kind—or, in other words, that man has certain species-specific properties not possessed at all, or in any degree, by other animals, such, for example, as propositional speech and conceptual thought. (Man certainly is the *only* animal on earth consciously thinking about the extinction of his species, and this, by itself, would suffice to establish a difference in kind.)

In the twenty-four years since that bright morning in the tent in 1950, much research has been done on animal communication, with dolphins and with chimpanzees, especially recent work in which it would *appear*—I stress "appear"—that chimpanzees make sentences. I have examined the research data and findings and I remain convinced that the difference between animal communication and human discourse is a difference in kind, not in degree. That, however, is not the subject of this evening's lecture. Whether man differs from other animals in kind, or degree, man's specific nature is a constant during the whole span of time during which the human race endures as a species—from five hundred thousand years ago until the future time, near or far, when *homo sapiens* no longer exists on earth or in the cosmos. Everything else in the human scene—every aspect of the human environment—has changed in that time and is changing more and more rapidly, but in that changing scene, man—his nature and his values—remains the unchanging constant.

As the title of this lecture indicates, I am going to consider the relation of the human constant to the changing scene during the last twenty-five years—the life-span so far of the Aspen Institute. In the course of such a review, I fear that I will not be able to refrain from personal reminiscences, some about the Aspen Institute and some autobiographical. If there was ever an occasion for reminiscences, this is it. Looking back over my own life. I think it fair to say that in 1950, at the age of 48, I had just reached maturity. Much of the work that I have done in the last 25 years has been done in conjunction with two institutes, both founded at about the same time—the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies and the Institute for Philosophical Research, of which I have been the Director since 1952. In preparation for this lecture, I have gone back over my files and examined the notes for almost as many lectures delivered at Aspen as the number of years that have elapsed since 1950. Looking at these lecture notes, I found that a

dozen or more are relevant to what I want to say this evening. Let me add, in passing that, from these Aspen lectures, five books have developed—books not only based on lectures delivered in Aspen, but also books written in Aspen.

The question to which the present lecture is addressed can, perhaps, be stated as follows:

> Has the relation between the human constant and the changing scene been altered in the last 25 years?
>
> Or, perhaps, as follows:
>
> Has there developed, for the first time in our lives, tension between life in the present and our expectations about the future of human life?

Though some of us may still be living in the sunshine of a prosperous and comfortable present, does a shadow hang over us—a shadow thrown by a threatening cloud on the horizon?

Once more apologizing for being autobiographical, let me see if I can throw light on this question in terms of my own life. As I review it, it seems to me good, though I hasten to add that I am fully conscious of Aristotle's warning not to judge the goodness of a life until it is finished. I do not claim to have lived as virtuously as is required for the achievement of a life of the highest degree of excellence. I can say, however, that I have been blessed by good fortune in many respects—the genes with which I was endowed, the country in which I was born, the parents I had, the opportunities that were open to me, the friends I made, my wife and children. Under such beneficent circumstances, the tasks I have been able to undertake and the work I have been able to do have contributed toward the making, in some degree or measure, of a good life, one in which I have enjoyed emotional and intellectual growth.

So far as I can tell, I have not suffered in any noticeable way from all the changes in the changing scene surrounding my life. I have lived through

> two world wars and many others
>
> two or three serious economic depressions
>
> the invention and use of the atomic bomb

mounting inflation

the ever-increasing rapidity of technological change the so-called knowledge explosion

some personal experiences of environmental pollution, such as choking smog

and the distresses arising from Vietnam, from justifiable insurgency on the part of the blacks, from the manifest discontent of a portion of the young, and from the horrors associated with the name of Watergate.

But throughout all this I have not experienced any significant change in my values or in my life-style. 'They have remained constant in the changing scene so far. To use the current jargon for the complaints with which so many of my contemporaries are concerned, I have not suffered

alienation

future shock

an identity crisis

loss of faith

a shift in values

I have not found life more difficult, more complicated, more dehumanized, more uncomfortable, more fearful.

Not even the so-called "knowledge explosion" has affected me adversely, though this, of all external changes, might be thought to impinge most intimately upon the kind of work I do. The reason is that the knowledge explosion imposes heavier and heavier burdens on the specialist—narrowing the field of his specialty and making communication with other specialists more difficult. But it does not affect the generalist. It is no more difficult for the generalist to survey the whole of human knowledge today than it was at the beginning of this century. Two thousand years ago, Aristotle, in addition to being a generalist able to survey the whole of human knowledge, was also a specialist in almost every field. That is no longer possible for anyone; but one can still be a generalist without being a specialist in more than one field or, perhaps, in none at all.

In addition to this autobiographical report, I think it is relevant to note that I would still say what I said in a lecture I gave here at Aspen three or four years ago—a lecture on *The Time of Our Lives*, subsequently published as a book. Three points in the main: *First*, looked at from the point of view of the human race as a whole, the twentieth century is by far the best of all centuries. *Second*, judged in terms of the conditions it provides for the majority of its people, the United States is the best country in which to live. *Third*, however difficult it may be to lead a good human life at any time, it is certainly not more difficult to make a good human life for one's self today than it was at any earlier period in human history.

All this I would still say of my own life, of my century, and of my country, but with this one important difference. I can no longer look forward to the future with the optimism I once had. The future no longer seems benign to me, as once it did. I am concerned about the circumstances under which my children will live and the kind of lives they will be able to lead—or, if not my children, then theirs. I am concerned, to use Heilbronner's phrase, about the human prospect. (That book, by the way, and many other books like it, would not and probably could not have been written twenty-five years ago—certainly not fifty years ago.) It is not that the changing scene has adversely affected those of us who are now alive and now in our maturity, but rather that it has produced in us a profound tension between our life in the present and our expectations concerning life in the future.

It is in the light of this tension that I want to consider with you the question of whether the relation of the human constant to the changing scene has itself changed in the last few years. I think I know the answer to that question. I would like to submit it for your consideration—and discussion. I propose to proceed in the following manner:

> *First*, a brief statement concerning the human constant, particularly in relation to the values that have their roots in human nature.
>
> *Second*, a review of the changing scene up to the middle or late sixties, and of the bearing of such changes on human values.
>
> *Third*, considerations concerning the future that have forced themselves upon us in the last five to ten years.

Finally, some conclusions, if any at all are possible.

II. *THE HUMAN CONSTANT*

I do not think that I have to argue the point that a biological species, consisting of a reproducing gene-pool, has a certain genetic constancy. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein's remark about the rose, a species is a species is a species. It may be necessary, however, to call your attention explicitly to certain consequences of this fact of specific genetic constancy.

One is that all members of the species, all human beings, no matter when and where they live, have exactly the same specific powers and properties. They do not all have these same specific powers and properties to the same degree. One individual may have more, another less, of each of the specific powers or properties that are common to all members of the species. It is in this way that every human individual differs from every other while at the same time sharing with every other the same specific traits that constitute their common human nature. Such individual differences underlie the inequalities—inequalities consisting in more and less of the same—which prevail among human beings, and make it true to say that all men are unequal. That truth, however, is quite consistent with the more important truth that all men are equal—equal in their specific humanity, equal as persons having the same human properties, regardless of how much they differ as individuals.

A second consequence of the fact of human constancy may be a little more difficult to grasp, and may even cause some of you to demur, but I must state it and argue for it because it is of crucial importance to everything that follows in this lecture. It is the distinction between human needs and human wants.

This distinction parallels the distinction made a moment ago between the specific equality of all men as human beings or as persons sharing the same specific nature and their many-faceted inequality as individuals possessing their common human traits in varying degrees. Just as all men share the same specific nature, so all have the same specifically natural needs—needs which are inherent in their biological constitution as human beings, whether they are conscious of them or not.

For example, they all need nutriment, not only of a certain quantity but also of a certain quality; and malnutrition is a deprivation of this need. Similarly, they all have minds as well as alimentary

systems; they all need knowledge and understanding; and they can suffer deprivation in the sphere of this need as well as in the sphere of nutriment for the body. The same can be said for a number of other goods, such as love or friendship, freedom, the pleasures of both body and mind, health, and so on.

In contrast to these basic natural needs, which are the same for all men because their specific nature is the same, the things that human beings consciously want for themselves differ not only as a result of their individual differences, but also as a result of the differing circumstances of their lives—the time and place of their birth, the cultural and social as well as physical environment in which they develop, the accidents of their daily lives, and so on.

The reason why I have stressed this distinction between natural human needs, specifically the same for all, and conscious human wants, differing from individual to individual, is that the only sound moral philosophy or ethical doctrine with which I am acquainted rests on this distinction.

Human happiness, which is identical in conception with a good human life as a whole and not with momentary experiences of delight or contentment, consists in the satisfaction of all natural human needs in a certain measure or proportion; and the pursuit of happiness, so conceived, requires moral virtue or the habit of making choices that contribute, in the long run, to the perfection of one's life as a whole rather than choices which provide momentary pleasures or transient satisfactions in the short run.

A human being deprived of one or more of the goods that his human nature needs for its fulfillment or perfection is miserable; and so, of course, is the individual whose vices led him to deprive himself of those needed goods in order to get things that he wants which, though they may appear to be good for him because he wants them, are not really good for him because he does not need them. The things an individual consciously wants may be innocuous in the sense that they do not interfere with his possession of the goods his nature needs, or they may function as impediments to his pursuit of happiness; and when they do moral virtue is required to overcome or set aside such wants.

Let me now ask you to think about your own lives and your own values. The ten questions I want to put to you have the same rhetorical form. They ask you to think about your own values in relation to the changes through which you have lived.

If you ever did think that some grasp on the truth about the world, man, and human society, is worth having, do you have any reason not to think so still?

If you ever did think that having your life enriched by genuine human friendships and loves is an indispensable good, have you any reason to change your mind on that score?

If you ever did think that being reasonable in dealing with other human beings and being prudent in the conduct of your own affairs are desirable forms of conduct, do you not still think so?

If you ever did think that health, in both body and mind, and longevity are conditions contributing to your happiness, have you changed your mind on this score?

If you ever did think that having enough free time to engage in the pursuit of leisure is needed in order to live a good human life, don't you still think so?

If you ever did think that a good life requires a moderate possession of worldly goods and that either too much or too little wealth can be a serious disadvantage, have you any reason to think otherwise now?

If you ever did think that having a good moral character or being morally mature is indispensable to living well (or, in other words, being temperate and having fortitude instead of yielding to childish indulgences and childish fears), are you not still of the same mind?

If you ever did think that civil peace and social justice are factors which facilitate the individual's pursuit of happiness, have you any reason now for thinking the opposite?

If you ever did think that the reign of law, not of force, and a government of laws which secures and protects natural rights based on natural needs, creates a society that enhances human life, are you still of the same opinion?

If you ever did think that everyone should have as much freedom as he can use justly, without harming other individuals or the community as a whole, do you not still think so?

I hope you have each tried to answer these questions for yourself. As you can see from the rhetorical form of the questions, my hope is, first, that you affirm all the values here enumerated; and second,

that you find no reason not to continue affirming them in spite of all the changes which have taken place in the last twenty-five years. Speaking for myself, I must say that nothing which has happened in the last twenty-five years impels me to change my judgment about the goods or values just set forth. Nothing that has happened challenges them or raises any disturbing question about them.

My files contain notes on all the Executive Seminars moderated here at Aspen during the last 25 years; and my memory of the discussions which took place at them is fairly detailed. Looking over these notes and exercising my memory, I can tell you that the basic questions we have discussed have remained the same—

> questions about freedom, equality, justice, rights, property, and progress
>
> questions about despotism, democracy, capitalism, social ism, communism
>
> questions about war and peace, law and force, government and anarchy

and underlying all these, have been the same fundamental questions about man, human happiness, virtue, and the good life.

How has the changing scene affected the questions, or the answers we give to them? Not at all, as I have tried to indicate, when we think of the present; but when we think of the future and of the generations to come, it is sometimes thought that our views must be altered; or, if not altered essentially, applied differently. Whether that is so or not, is the question.

III. *THE CHANGING SCENE UNTIL VERY RECENTLY (1949-1965)*

During the first fifteen years of the Aspen Institute, and especially between 1955 and 1965, I delivered a number of lectures here all bearing on the future of man, trying to extrapolate that future from the direction of the historical changes with which we are acquainted. Behind these lectures delivered at Aspen lay some earlier efforts to think about the future of man. Let me mention them briefly as background for the points made at Aspen:

In 1941, in the summer of Stalingrad, I wrote *How to Think about War and Peace* in which I predicted that, within the next 500

years, permanent world peace would be established by the institution of a world federal government and in which I argued that world government was not only possible, necessary, and desirable, but also inevitable.

In the years between 1945 and 1955, I wrote a series of papers and gave a series of lectures on the future of democracy, in which I echoed Tocqueville's prophecy that the future belongs to democracy, and argued that political democracy would come to its full fruition as the only perfectly just form of government when three changes took place: *first*, the establishment of economic democracy and economic justice; *second*, the establishment of an educational system in which all the children are schooled for citizenship and prepared for the uses of freedom: and *third*, the establishment of world peace. During those years, I saw no reason why all three of these basic changes would not take place or could not be brought about.

During the same years, I gave a lecture entitled "An Optimistic View of History," and it was optimistic indeed, for it looked forward to a time when world peace had been established by world government, when political democracy had been perfected by economic democracy and economic justice, when, in short, all the external obstacles or impediments to a good human life had been removed. This lecture took account of the existence of the atomic bomb and it even mentioned the threat of the population explosion; but at that time neither of those things seemed to present insuperable difficulties. The future still looked rosy, and the only problem, with which the lecture concluded, concerned how mail would make further progress after he had provided himself with all the external conditions of a good human life.

Lectures that I gave at Aspen between 1955 and 1965 reflected the same optimism about the future and were concerned with the same problem. Let me add that, at the time, I measured the future of man on earth in terms of millions upon millions of years—the length of time it would take before the sun exploded and became a dead star, asphyxiating all life in the solar system. You can see why, with the rate of technological advance and the acceleration of progress in all other respects, I thought that the limits of progress in all the external conditions of human life might be achieved in the next thousand years, leaving mankind millions of years still to go with nothing to improve except himself—his mind and character.

I summed up all this thinking about the future in one lecture delivered here in 1959, entitled "The Future of Man." Its main

points were as follows. (1) The changes which have taken place in the last six thousand years of history represent progress from a state of affairs in which the conditions of a good human life were provided for none to a state of affairs in which such conditions were provided for some men but not for all; and that the extrapolation of this line of progress was toward a state of affairs in which such conditions could and would be provided for all. (2) This further step of progress would be accomplished by world-wide industrialization, by world-wide democracy, both political and economic, and by world government together with the elimination of all forms of imperialism and colonialism, the extirpation of race prejudice, and the removal of all the barriers that are connected with the notion of the foreign. (3) With the elimination of war by world government, all the wealth that is wasted in defense establishments or destroyed by armed conflict, could be used for economic welfare and for education. (4) These things would not come about unless men were virtuous enough to bring them about, but that the external obstacles were such that men could overcome them, given the intelligence and will-power to do so. In short, man was not doomed to a defeat he could not avoid, no matter how he applied his mind or fortified his will. The future lay in his hands.

In looking over the notes for this 1959 lecture on the future of man, I found in the folder a review of a book by Professor Kenneth Boulding, entitled *The Meaning of the Twentieth Century.* The review was by Professor Heilbronner, and was dated January, 1965. The future of man now began to look different. Let us consider the difference.

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