

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

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Part 2 of 2

IV. THE CHANGING SCENE—THE HUMAN PROSPECT— SINCE 1965

In that book on the meaning of the twentieth century, Professor Boulding was concerned with the transition from the industrial society of the present to what has come to be called the post-industrial society of the future. As he viewed it, that transition, if achieved, would be a step forward or upward, a step of progress for mankind as a whole toward conditions beneficent to human life. To complete this transition, four great “traps” must be successfully avoided. They are, according to Professor Boulding:

- (1) The trap of nuclear war, with its threat of the total demolition of the civilized world itself.
- (2) The trap of population growth which, if unchecked, will suffocate us all, rich and poor nations alike.
- (3) The trap of dwindling or exhausted energy resources before a new level of energy technology is attained.
- (4) The trap which lies in the frailty of man himself, unequal to the task of solving the problems that mount before him.

Professor Boulding did his best to show how these four traps might be avoided, but on this score he failed to satisfy Professor Heilbronner, who reviewed his book. Judging from his own recent book on *The Human Prospect*, Heilbronner would be even less satisfied today with Boulding's argument than he was in 1965. Let me turn, therefore, to Professor Heilbronner's book.

In place of Boulding's four traps, Heilbronner enumerates four external challenges that must be met if mankind is to have a future worth looking forward to. Two are the same: the threat of the population explosion and the threat of nuclear war. One is of the same sort, but elaborated in greater detail: it involves not only dwindling or exhausted energy resources, but also increasing environmental pollution with increasing industrial growth, especially thermal pollution. This must be taken together with the dilemma of having to choose between the dire consequences of industrial expansion and the equally dire consequences of no industrial growth accompanied by population increase and dwindling resources. In place of Boulding's fourth trap of human frailty, Heilbronner substitutes the threat to human life and society of science and technology as the uncontrolled driving force in our culture.

I will not attempt to report Heilbronner's argument in detail. Suffice it to call your attention to the following points which he makes, points which I think are central to his argument and also central to my criticism of it. (1) Neither industrial capitalism nor industrial communism has any distinct advantage over the other in the effort to cope with the external challenges that confront mankind. (2) The revolution of rising expectations that is occurring all over the world involves an insatiable drive for economic equality, not only within the relatively affluent nations, but also as between the poor and the rich nations. (3) There are only two ways

to satisfy this, demand for economic equality—one is the increased production of wealth by industrial expansion or growth, the other is the redistribution of what wealth there is by measures that are likely to be despotic or even to involve violence. (4) The struggle for an equality of goods is likely to lead to wars between the have and the have-not nations, and to totalitarian or despotic regimes able to impose redistributions of wealth by force. (5) After discussing the submissiveness inherent in human beings which makes them prone to accept authoritarian regimes, and the parochialism or xenophobia which stands in the way of world community and world government, Heilbrunner questions man's having the will to make sacrifices in the present for the good of future generations. Yet, as he sees it, such sacrifices are called for. (6) Either because we are unable to sustain industrial growth or because we are unable to tolerate its effects on the environment, especially thermal pollution, the industrial growth process will be forced to stow down within a generation or two and will decline thereafter, with all the consequences that entails for a world in which population is on the increase and the demand for an equality of economic goods cannot be abated. (7) Since, according to Heilbrunner, the myopia that confines the present vision of men to the short-term future is not likely to disappear overnight, the outlook is for convulsive change—change forced on us by external events rather than by conscious choice, by catastrophe rather than by calculation. (8) Posing the question, “Is there hope for man,” and meaning by it whether man can meet the challenges that confront him without the payment of a fearful price, Heilbrunner's answer is NO—no hope without the payment of a fearful price. (9) The price is the continuance of human society on a basis very different from that of the present—a society much more like the primitive or pre-industrial societies of the past, tradition-oriented and static, a society in which we will not be able to enjoy, according to Heilbrunner, the search for scientific knowledge, the delight in intellectual heresy, and the freedom to order one's life as one pleases.” (10) Maintaining, for reasons that are far from clear to me, that primitive or pre-industrial societies cultivate the human spirit and provide the conditions for human happiness, whereas technologically advanced industrial societies, whether capitalistic or communistic, are dehumanizing and defeat the pursuit of happiness.

Heilbrunner concludes by saying: “What we do not know, but can only hope is that future man can rediscover the self-renewing vitality of primitive culture without reverting to its levels of ignorance and cruel anxiety.”

Does the picture of the future that is painted by Heilbrunner call for a change in the fundamental values that are inherent in the human constant—the specific nature of man? Does the human constant stand in a different rotation to the changing scene that Heilbrunner envisages for the future?

My answer to both questions is negative. On the contrary, I think that it is not a new moral code which we need, a new set of values adapted to a changed set of conditions. To solve the problems we now face, what is needed, on the contrary, is the old set of values put to work, made operative in the conduct of individuals and societies.

Let me say in passing that there have been many conferences at Aspen in the last few years—a few this very summer—in which the call is for a new moral code, a new set of values. I am at a loss to understand such talk. The set of values I asked you to consider at the beginning of this lecture—values inherent in the needs of specific human nature—would help us to solve all of our problems if we had the moral virtue and the prudence to put them into operation.

The defect we suffer from is not a lack of understanding of the right values, but a lack of will-power or virtue to live and act in accordance with them. The difficulty we must overcome is not the difficulty of knowing the right values, and the difficulty of becoming virtuous enough to enact them.

What I have just said applies to Heilbrunner's argument, for my main criticism of it turns on his blind-spots in moral philosophy—blind spots concerning happiness and virtue, blind-spots concerning equality and freedom. In addition, he fails to see how the fatal weakness of a culture dominated by science and technology can be remedied.

According to Heilbrunner, the advanced societies, capitalist and socialist alike, have failed with regard to the achievement of happiness for their peoples. He attributes this failure to “the presence of scientific technology and the industrial civilization that is built upon it.” He goes on to say that the life-styles of these industrial civilizations “seem dazzlingly rich in every dimension except that of the cultivation of the human person.” He contrasts industrial with pre-industrial civilization by praising the latter as much less de-humanizing, much less inimical to individual happiness. And he speculates about the possibility that the industrial apparatus, if it were accompanied by extensive

decentralization, workers' control, and an atmosphere of political and social freedom, might be reconciled with "human contentment."

There is no indication whatsoever that Heilbrunner understands what human happiness consists in or what is involved in its pursuit and attainment. He all but confesses this by putting the word "happiness" in quotation marks when he uses it; and, in addition, he substitutes the word "contentment" as a synonym for "happiness". What happens to Heilbrunner's argument if, instead of operating with an ill-defined or erroneous conception of happiness, which thinks of it in terms of experienced pleasure and contentment, we substitute a sound, purely ethical and non-psychological, conception of happiness, which thinks of it in terms of a whole life well-lived by virtuous pursuit of the real goods which satisfy the natural needs inherent in human nature, not a striving after the apparent goods which satisfy artificially induced individual wants?

First of all, we would dismiss as folly the notion that primitive societies provide their people with conditions of life advantageous to the pursuit of happiness.

Second, we would recognize that, among the pre-industrial societies of the past, some of them, notably the Greek city-states and the Roman Republic, provided for a very small part of their populations the external conditions requisite for the pursuit of happiness. And we would also know that the number of individuals who, provided with such conditions, used them well by living virtuously was much smaller still. A society or civilization cannot make people happy. It can, at best, provide the external conditions of happiness—for a smaller or a larger number of people—but whether or not they take advantage of the conditions provided them and engage in the extremely difficult task of making good lives for themselves is wholly dependent on their own choices and actions.

Third, we would be compelled to assert that the technologically advanced industrial civilizations of the present are superior to the pre-industrial civilizations of the past precisely because they provide a much larger portion of their population with the external conditions requisite for the pursuit of happiness, rightly conceived. And the post-industrial civilizations of the future may extend these conditions to an even larger circle of human beings.

It is necessary to repeat that this does not mean that the number of

individuals who pursue happiness correctly and successfully under such conditions is equal to the number for whom the advantageous conditions are available. On the contrary. The percentage of those who do is likely to be the same, whether the number of those provided with the necessary conditions is very small or very large.

Heilbrunner may be right that the regnant values in an industrial civilization exalt the apparent goods which satisfy individual wants, not the real goods which satisfy natural needs. But this was equally true in Periclean Athens, as the testimony of Socrates makes clear. Socrates had to tell his fellow-Athenians over and over again that it was virtue, not wealth and pleasure, which counted. A proper pursuit of happiness will probably always require the individual to resist and reject the regnant values of the society in which he lives, whether that is pre-industrial, industrial, or post-industrial.

The simple fact is that the pursuit of happiness, under the best conditions, is extremely difficult. Making a good human life for one's self, even when that life is surrounded by fortunate circumstances, involves pains and sacrifices, the foregoing of immediate pleasures for the sake of greater but remote goods, the bearing of immediate hardships for the same reason, always choosing the greater good in the long run rather than the lesser good near at hand in the short run. That is why strength of will and mind, or moral virtue and prudence, are indispensable to the attainment of some modicum of happiness—some approximation to a good human life, which is rarely, if ever, perfectly achieved by anyone.

The bearing of all this on Heilbrunner's argument should be obvious. He concludes by saying that there is no hope for the human race unless it is prepared to pay what he calls a "fearful price." If he means by this that mankind must be prepared to set its eyes on long-term goals instead of short-term ones, that mankind must be prepared to suffer pains, forego pleasures, make sacrifices, and order its affairs rationally and virtuously, in order to solve the problems that confront it—if this is what he means, then we must agree that the salvation of civilization imposes the same moral requirements upon mankind that the pursuit of happiness imposes on the individual; and it becomes necessary to add that the difficulties in the way are as great, if not greater; and so the likelihood of success is as slight, if not slighter.

However slight the chances are, however difficult the task, it is not impossible—either for the individual to achieve happiness given

the requisite circumstances, or for mankind to achieve a post-industrial civilization in which the external conditions requisite for the pursuit of happiness becomes available to all the peoples of the earth.

This brings me to my second criticism of Heilbrunner's argument, which goes to his blind-spots about equality and freedom.

Heilbrunner's recognition of the world-wide striving for economic equality—or even more generally, for an equality of conditions—leads him to predict a future which is likely to include bloody conflicts between the rich and poor nations, and repressive, authoritarian regimes engaged in the forcible redistribution of wealth. In addition, he presents us with the following dilemma: (1) If, on the one hand, we slow down industrial expansion in order to prevent a suicidal deterioration in the biosphere, we cannot produce enough wealth to eliminate poverty, starvation, and widespread misery. (2) If, on the other hand, we accelerate industrial expansion in an effort to produce enough wealth to go around, we will probably heat up the atmosphere to a degree that will make this planet unlivable.

That dilemma cannot be resolved, in my judgment, in terms of a quantitative conception of economic equality, which is the only one that Heilbrunner seems to have in mind. If economic equality consists in everyone having the same amount of wealth, the same amount of economic goods and services, then economic equality will never be achieved on earth—neither within the advanced industrial and affluent societies, nor as between the rich and the poor nations. It will never be achieved by wars between poor and rich, nor by repressive, authoritarian regimes attempting to redistribute a limited supply of goods.

Is there any alternative conception of economic equality, one that may make it possible to establish a world-wide equality of conditions, without at the same time endangering the survival of life on this planet? Yes—a qualitative, as opposed to a quantitative conception of economic equality, according to which economic equality is achieved when everyone has what any man needs to lead a decent human life, even though some men may have more than anyone needs.

This qualitative conception of economic equality rests on the distinction between the natural needs common to all and the conscious wants which vary from individual to individual—the same distinction that is essential to a proper conception of human

happiness. Since wants are limitless, no amount of wealth produced could ever satisfy all human wants; for when they are satisfied in any degree, they tend to increase their demands or vary them. But natural needs are strictly limited. What human beings need to live decent human lives never becomes inordinate and insatiable, as individual wants do. Hence, if we can solve the problem of population growth (which is certainly not impossible), then it is not impossible, however difficult, to overcome the economic inequalities which beset the world today, both within the affluent societies and between the rich and poor nations.

One word more about the qualitative conception of economic equality. Would we not all agree that economic inequality exists between two groups of human beings, one of which possesses the economic goods needed for a decent human life and the other of which is deprived of the wealth needed to live well? Would we not all agree that the haves and have-nots, thus defined, are economically unequal? Does it not follow, then, that if all were haves, and none were have-nots—if all had the goods needed to live well humanly, and none were deprived of such goods—all would be economically equal even though some might have more, and some less, of the necessary goods? If, in reply you say, “Yes, but, among the haves, those who have less will regard themselves as poor and come into conflict with those who have more,” my only answer is that such conflict is unavoidable as long as men do not recognize that having as much as one needs is sufficient for the pursuit of happiness, and either *having more* than one needs or *wanting more* because others have it, can impede that pursuit, and frustrate the attainment of happiness.

My own guess about the economic system of the future, one that may be able to solve the problem of economic equality in the terms stated, is that it will be neither capitalism nor communism as we know them now in their doctrinaire forms, but rather a mixture or a blend that will be an industrial welfare economy with sufficient decentralization to prevent the monolithic totalitarianism which Tocqueville so feared, and which Heilbrunner also fears.

As for human freedom in this picture of the future, it may be endangered if it is conceived, as Heilbrunner appears to conceive it, as consisting in the individual's doing as he likes—in his words “the freedom to order one's life as one pleases.” That, however, is not a correct conception of liberty, for it fails to draw the line between liberty and license. It is this misconception of liberty which leads to the illusion that anarchy would be better than government, for then everyone could do exactly as he pleases; or,

short of that, the less government, the better, for the sake of maximizing freedom.

The truth here is that liberty is not an unlimited good, but a good that must be limited by justice. An individual should have no more liberty than he can use justly—no more than he can use without injuring other individuals or the welfare of the community. It is not the amount of government which affects human freedom, but the justice of government. If human beings are governed justly, they have as much freedom as they deserve or can legitimately ask for. Hence, the amount of government that may be needed to solve the ecological and economic problems that mankind must solve in order to survive is, in itself, no threat to human freedom, as Heilbroner wrongly supposes; for if that government, in any amount, is justly directed to the welfare of all, then no sacrifice of genuine freedom will result.

Finally, I come to my third criticism of Heilbroner's argument, which concerns his complaint about a culture that is dominated by science and technology.

He is right that "science and technology are the driving forces of our age"; and he is right in thinking that a civilization or culture dominated by science and technology is lop-sided and lacking in a proper "balance between power and control." Diagnosing the malaise of our culture, Heilbroner fails to prescribe the only remedy that might be effective, however unlikely may be the cultural revolution it would involve. This remedy, in a word, is a restoration of philosophy and also, perhaps, religion to the place they should occupy in a well-rounded culture and one in which there is sufficient control over power to make its use constructive rather than destructive.

Many years ago, in the Aspen summer of 1952, a discussion took place on the lawn of the Paepcke residence, for then we had no seminar rooms. The night before Clarence Randall, President of Inland Steel, had given a lecture in the Opera House, for then we had no Paepcke Auditorium. Mr. Randall had said that the production of wealth was the ultimate end or good of both man and society. I can still remember his words: "productivity is the end of life." Jacques Barzun and I took him on the next morning and, I am pleased to report, we succeeded in persuading him that he was wrong—that productivity and the wealth it produced were, far from being the ends of life, the merest of means to leading a good Life. The point of my story is that we did not argue with Mr. Randall on economic grounds or on ecological grounds that ever-

increasing industrial expansion might not be an unmitigated good. We argued instead on moral or ethical grounds—in terms of a proper conception of the order of goods, of means and ends, of human needs and human happiness, and of moral virtue as an indispensable factor in the process.

That is the use of philosophy, as contrasted with the use of science and technology. And that is why philosophy must be restored to a commanding position in order to correct the imbalance of a culture dominated by science and technology. Science and technology confer power on mankind—power over nature, power to produce external goods of all sorts; but it is naked power, a power to produce evils as well as goods, destructive power as well as constructive. If productive power is the only use that one can put knowledge to, then philosophical knowledge, as compared with scientific knowledge, is totally useless. But that is not the case, even though Francis Bacon and many after him in modern times have thought so. Knowledge can also be used to direct our lives and control our conduct; and when we think of this use of knowledge, we must admit that, as compared with philosophical knowledge, scientific knowledge is totally useless. It gives us power but it does not tell us how to use it as a means—for good ends or bad. Hence a culture or civilization dominated by science and technology, and either devoid of philosophy and religion, or one in which they are relegated to places of little importance and influence, is a culture that necessarily has more and more power and less and less control of it.

A culture dominated by science and technology is, as Heilbroner implies, a juggernaut on wheels. There is no way of controlling the juggernaut without putting philosophy once again in the driver's seat, as it was in pre-modern cultures. There is no other remedy for the malaise of our civilization. But can we produce the cultural revolution that would be required for it? I can only say that doing so would be very difficult and very unlikely, but not impossible—and in this respect, it is like all the other prescriptions that I have suggested for the salvation of mankind. Though they all appear to be bitter medicines to take, mankind may resort to them when the extremities to which we have come persuade us to take drastic measures as a last resort.

V. *CONCLUDING REMARKS*

In conclusion, let me repeat one point that I made earlier, for it is absolutely crucial to the sense of everything I have tried to say.


To solve the grave problems that now confront mankind, to overcome the threats to the perpetuation of the species, and to remove the obstacles to the development of a civilization salubrious in its conditions for the living of decent human lives, we do not need a new moral philosophy or a new set of values.

The human constant remains the controlling factor in the changing scene, no matter how radical and even unforeseeable the changes may be in the scene of the future. And it is in terms of that human constant—the power and properties of human nature and the human needs to which they give rise—that a sound moral philosophy was formulated in antiquity and is still available to us, if we will but have recourse to its eminently practical wisdom.

But, as I said earlier, while it is not difficult to know and understand the values which should direct our lives and control our society and culture, it is extremely difficult to put this knowledge and understanding into action. Without moral virtue, it is impossible to do so, and moral virtue, unfortunately is not easily come by. It is not produced by knowing or understanding the truth in the realm of values. The whole history of mankind so far might have been different, and so also might the human prospect or the future of man be different, if only Socrates had been right instead of wrong in thinking that knowledge is virtue—that *the man who knows what is right will always do what is right*.

Most of us must confess, whether we do so in church or not, that we done what we knew we ought not to have done, and have left undone what we knew we ought to have done. So long as that remains the core of human frailty, the human prospect must remain as dim as the human past has been. What William Graham Sumner said in the 1890's is even truer today: "The power of the human race over the conditions of prosperous and happy living are sufficient to banish poverty and misery, *if it were not for folly and vice*."

Despairing of man's future on earth, a recent conference of physicists, astronauts, and space flight technologists seriously discussed the possibility and desirability of establishing human colonies in space. It was even suggested that a century from now most of humanity will be living in space. And a book has just been published, *The Next Ten Thousand Years* by Adrian Berry, which repudiates the prophecies of doomsday for mankind and predicts man's utilizing the resources of the entire solar system and, ultimately, the far reaches of the galaxy.

I cannot gainsay such predictions, but to all of them, I am compelled to say, “Well and good, but only if man, in carrying the human constant with him to islands or continents in outer space, somehow discovers the magical formula needed to make Socrates right when he said that knowledge is virtue—for only then will men do what they know is right.” 

A lecture delivered by Mortimer J. Adler in Aspen, July 2, 1974

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

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