

UNIVERSALIZING THE BROADENED MEANINGS OF "LIFE"

If in our time we interpret "life" to include access to life-saving medicines, this is a fairly recent vision. As James Bryant Conant once argued, until about 1900 medicines killed about as many people as they cured.³ Today, however, the situation is entirely different. We indeed have medicines that cure and/or prevent many life-threatening diseases. We also have a growing body of public health knowledge that makes it possible to prevent or reduce many of the ills that have shortened human lives in times past, i.e. cleaning up water supplies, disposing of sewage and toxic waste, cleaning up air pollutants, etc.. I call them "knowledges" rather than "experiences" since they illustrate the ways that the sciences are embedded in political and economic realities.

In the middle of the past century, at the close of the bloody World War II, a *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was created under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt. I would focus on two of its articles, numbers 25 and 27, and in particular on the phrases that I have put in boldface. The Declaration was adopted in 1948, but, as we know, nations are still very far from implementing many of its provisions.

Article 25

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living **adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family**, including food, clothing, housing and **medical care** and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 27

Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and **to share in scientific advancement and its benefits**.

OUR PREOCCUPATIONS WITH VIOLENCE

The phrasings in these Articles, of course, had many precedents. My point here is that 55 years later we have made only the most limited progress in realizing them either locally or globally. No doubt, there are extenuating circumstances as events have intervened to make implementation difficult. The Cold War diverted much research energy and resource into improved deliveries of violence on a global scale. Countries were drawn into this polarized struggle, and poorer countries were forced to divert even larger proportions of their gross domestic product (GDP) into violence and its means. I add that this term covers all those other terms that mask their violent nature, i.e. that are called "defense," "counterinsurgency," "state security," "regime change," "covert actions," and the like. I deliberately avoid the term "terrorism," not because it is innocent of violence, but because it is ambiguous and inevitably relativistic. More often than not, what one group calls "terrorism," another other calls "liberation struggle." Violence, however named, limits, or threatens to limit, lives, liberties, and properties. Any moral evaluations of it in its many forms must start with that empirical fact. Even the exercise of police powers within a society can be understood under certain conditions as a form of violence.

Suppose, however, that we take the Declaration seriously and argue that the "right to life/right to exist" is the most basic of all human rights. We will then be in a position to examine those forces that negate this right. The broadest term for such forces is violence. First, we will need to distinguish between personal violence and structural violence. When A decides to kill B, or destroys his or her liberty or property, that is clearly violence and most cultures recognize it as such. Suppose that the community decides that someone who steals from another should be tried and incarcerated. Liberty has been lost, and there is a sense in which we must say that violence has therefore occurred. More accurately, one act of violence has generated another. When such acts are built into law, they acknowledge personal violence and claim the need for a violent response to it. Faubion suggests that the application of moral judgment to violence in this most general sense is best explained by using the relatively neutral terms of "moral agent" and "moral

patient.”⁴ Thus the agent is the initiator of violence; the patient is the recipient of it. Their relationship is characterized as violent.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCES

In addition to these intended situations of violence, we need to assess the roles of structural violences. The root of the concept is in a neo-Marxian insistence on the analysis of collective forces. In our time, liberation theologians (predominately but not exclusively Roman Catholic) have been most active in developing such analyses. The Encyclicals of John XXIII as well as the Medellin conference of Latin American bishops (1968) centered on the concept of a “preferential option for the poor.” The critique of liberalism (both the North American versions and the more worldwide “liberal” economics), building upon a classic conception of “common good,” emphasized increasing inequalities as the inevitable outcome of individualist ideologies.

POVERTY AS THE ROOT

If being poor—existing in poverty—is an inevitable part of the economic system, then all the consequences of poverty are predictable; none are “accidents.” They are not the results of ignorance or laziness. Increasing economic polarizations are “internal to the system and a natural product of it.”

What becomes even more interesting in our times is that the situation of the former Third World has now been globalized. Poverty may be somewhat relative to time and place (the economists have spoken at length about “relative deprivations”) but increasing gaps between those at the top and those at the bottom are easily quantifiable and have predictable political consequences in a world of widespread communications.

PHILOSOPHICAL CODA

In the 1960s, when I was trying to function as a Unitarian Universalist (UU) theologian, I created the phrase “the expansion of the quality of life” to articulate something beyond simply the presence or absence of physical existence. Such a focus seemed appropriate when addressing the affluent and highly educated liberal religionists I was dealing with. For a variety of reasons, not of interest here, that phrase never succeeded in the Universalist Unitarian circles. But it did, however, begin to appear within a few years in American political discourse—even from the White House.

In more recent years “quality of life” has surfaced in economic circles, complementing if not displacing a quantitative focus on monetary policy.¹¹ The gross product of an economy, and equally easy to display a comparison of averaged GDPs. But these numbers can be quite deceptive. Imagine the average income of the board of directors of the Microsoft Corporation before and after Bill Gates enters the room.

I argued then that Unitarian Universalists (and Ethical Culturists) would do best if they explored and developed their own moral/ethical discoveries. They were (and still are) highly educated and wealthy persons living in advanced societies without the confounding disabilities of theisms, moralities, and ideologies handed down from agricultural pasts.

The rise of fundamentalisms around the world, and their enormous success in the United States, makes those goals still relevant. For some time, economists have reminded us of the distinctions between income and wealth. In the present situation of high unemployment, that distinction becomes much more poignant. But the increasing inequality of income and of wealth within this economy, as well as within much of the developing world, makes my humanist agenda something of a “luxury” (however essential it may be in the long run). Our “right” to develop and promulgate the lessons of our experiments in post-traditional living must be joined with our willingness to simultaneously develop and promote an agenda for the rest of humanity that will effectively reduce poverty and its devastating results.

There is indeed a hierarchy of human needs that cannot be ignored. Life, health, shelter, food come first! Freedoms of thought, speech, actions can only be sustained on that material base.