The Value Vacuum

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I

EVERY age has its own peculiar problems, which usually turn out to be a combination of new problems together with perennial ones, perhaps in a new or disguised form. Certainly our times do not lack for difficult and perplexing problems, many of which we know we will not solve completely, but some of which we must meet and solve to some degree.

One of the problems within this cluster I have chosen to call "the value vacuum." It is, I would stress, not the only one—not necessarily the most crucial one—, but I suspect that we will not do very well with the others unless we meet this one better than we seem to have so far. We can come at it by way of a statement made three years ago by Dennis Gabor, Professor of Applied Electron Physics at the University of London.

> Who is responsible for this tragi-comedy of Man frustrated by success? If the intellectuals at the other side of the fence say that the fault is ours, of the scientists and inventors, we are not in a position to deny it. But instead of bowing our heads in shame, I think we ought to return the accusation and ask: "Who has left Mankind without a Vision?"[1]

This calls to mind the proverb, "Where there is no vision the people perish." And it calls to mind numerous statements in contemporary literature where the wasteland, the emptiness, of human lives is set forth. Not the lives of people who have nothing or who are caught in great suffering, but who have more than they need, who have family and friends, education and culture, but nevertheless, a heavy sense of emptiness. Indeed, this is not news any more, and we have heard it enough that now when somebody tells us, "we are the hollow men," we are apt to turn away, saying, "I know—I've heard that one—just don't spill it on me."

Two examples may be in order. The first is from Robert Henriques' novel, **Too Little Love**, from a poem called, "Song of the Century."

> We march to the night and we plunder the century,
> Nothing to loot, for we've looted the lot.
> Our hearts are heavy, our hands are empty,
> From too much getting and too little got.[2]

That says it as far as many current gospels would have it. A second example is one that may keep us from feeling too sorry for ourselves and help us to remember that this is not an entirely new problem, perhaps an old one in slightly new form. For this was Faust's problem, as Goethe presented it in the play's opening lines.

> Out on't! I've searched philosophy,
> Medicine and Law I've sifted in vain,
> And (God above!) to Theology
> I've given the best of heart and brain.
> Pitiful fool! I ponder and pore
> And grow no wiser than before.
> Ah, but I wear the master's gown,
> The doctor's scarlet; up and down
> These ten years past with cons and pros
> I've led my scholars by the nose . . .
> But I've paid for that a ruinous fee,
> No less than the loss of all joy in living . . .[3]

These melancholy statements express a problem that is a very real one to

[1] Quoted by Karl E. Meyer: *The New America,* N.Y.: Basic Books, 1961.

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[2] Op. cit., New York: Viking Press, 1950.

[3] Anna Swanwick translation, London: Bell, 1902.

many people today. It is the loss of zest, the loss of a sense of value and of the vividness of value. You see many signs of it: People of ability, willing to settle for far less than they might make of their lives; people of conviction, who think twice before they voice their conviction—and then choose silence; people in significant posts, who no longer see significance in their work; people who follow a calling, but not as a calling, rather as a treadmill; people for whom the good race has become the rat race.

Now this, I submit, is a spiritual problem. It is, that is to say, a problem of perception and morale, not a problem of external circumstances that can be manipulated and thereby yield inward renewal. G. K. Chesterton once said that "the world will never starve for wonders, but only for want of wonder." This is the nub of this particular problem.

This, then, is what I mean by the value vacuum: an absence of a lively sense of values in life, a weakened relationship with things that nourish values, and a dimmed vision of hopes that make life worthwhile.

It is not of course an absolute vacuum, and I grant that the word "vacuum" is an overstatement. And of course some people suffer more deeply from it than others. With any of us there will be times when this is not a problem at all, but probably other times when it is.

In particular I do not say that there is any magic by which finding the answer to this will automatically make other problems disappear or solve themselves. But I do say that without esprit, without a rekindling of that inward vitality imparted by a vivid sense of life's present values, we are not apt to do a very good job of solving other problems. And I do say that in our society something like a value vacuum does constitute a serious problem, and that it should be particularly the responsibility of those who deal with the spirit of man—educators, behavioral scientists, humanists, religionists—to renew the vision without which the people perish.

II

What are some of the causes of this condition? We have all heard many analyses, and it will be enough here merely to remind ourselves of a few of the important contributive factors.

1. We do live in dangerous and unsettled times. We face unprecedented problems with unprecedented and really unusable powers. Recently an eight-year-old boy, after hearing a newscast on the radio, said: "They keep talking about war . . . I don't want that . . . I want to grow up to be a man . . . It's hard to think about never having a chance to do that." Well, that states the problem of mankind in capsule form. If children of that age are unsettled by the shadows hovering about in the world we live in, little wonder that there is much discouragement spread about.

2. Social mobility is another cause, and it, too, is something we must live with. But the search for roots, when you are on the move—or when others around you are on the move—, is as difficult as it is unsettling.

3. Affluence is also a cause. Perhaps most of us do not feel very affluent. Yet when I look at the condition of mankind either across history or over the world, I have to admit that I am very well off. And here again is something new that we have not learned how to cope with very well. For so much of spiritual aspiration has been a compensation for material lack, that we know all too little about how to find a vision that is for something more and something deeper.

4. Many of the visions and hopes and values of yesterday simply are not any longer tenable in the new world we are entering. Some of them need to be enlarged and refashioned, and some of them need to be thrown out. A most natural reaction to this challenge is to retreat into some kind of value vacuum, existence without vision, living, as Goethe put it, without "joy of living."

So much—and all too inadequately—for the causes. I turn now to some of

the manifestations of the value vacuum. Where do we find some indications of it?

III

1. Consider first the realm of the arts, and probe a little more deeply into some of the matters already touched upon in literature. In Faust the emptiness is the **beginning** of the story, and its fascination lies in the answer to meaninglessness and the consequences entailed. In your contemporary "angry young men" plays, the affirmation of emptiness is the **conclusion.** In varying degree the value vacuum is relieved with brief flashes of some glimpse of a positive good or fleeting intimation of an affirmed judgment, but in the main the dominant themes are often of estrangement, lostness, illusion. Jack Kerouac's statement gives us the message in its pure essence: "I don't know and I don't care and it doesn't make any difference."

Now I am not joining in the hue and cry against the dramatist's picturization or against the arts of our time. This theme often makes very good theater, but what makes good theater does not necessarily make for a good life. I think Macbeth is great, but I am not eager to be the Macbeth's house guest. It is, as Hamlet puts it, the function of art "to hold as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." And if the artists still do this—and I think they do it very well—we cannot blame them if major themes are those of futility, emptiness, and chaotic discontinuities. The testimony of the theater, the novelist, the poet, the short story writer is clear that for many people today life, so full of things, surrounded by others, is a pervasive emptiness. Robert Frost said it for us some years ago in words that now have especial relevance:

> They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
> Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
> I have it in me so much nearer home
> To scare myself with my own desert places.[4]

2. Consider, in the second place, the realm of ethics, by which I do not mean merely adhering to the rules of a game, but that deeper matter of clarity of judgment where values are concerned, and conviction as to the base and sanction for such judgments. Ethics in the philosophical sense is not the science of rule book skill—or how to win without actually cheating, or at any rate, not getting caught—, but the knowledge of character in individuals and societies.

Here again we immediately think of scandals and shenanigans in every sector of life, in high places and low, by the mighty and the flighty. What is of particular significance for the subject before us is not that this happens, as the touching, plaintive recital of those exposed as enmeshed in duplicity, dishonesty, and hidden connivance. You know the song and all its verses: I didn't realize . . . Everybody else does it . . . Or practically the same thing . . . There were pressures . . . I was confused," little realizing that these self-justifications still miss the point and reveal, if true, an even flabbier character, a more gross distortion of evaluative judgment, than at first appeared. One thinks of the athletes who condemned the "slush fund" used in their school, and added, "besides they gave it to the wrong players."

But this is not too surprising when an influential school of thought in philosophy is telling us that there is no such thing as right and wrong, that value judgments are only circuitous ways of talking really about our emotions. Here is "other-directedness" dignified by scholarly apology. I recommend A. J. Ayer's **Language, Truth and Logic,** if you think I have overstated the matter.

And again, note that I am not talking about people who deliberately choose the wrong or make a career of evil. I am talking about well intentioned peo-

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[4] *Collected Poems of Robert Frost.* New York: Halcyon House, 1939, "Desert Places."

ple who seem to have slipped into a moral realm of the swamp, in which there are no moorings, no clear direction, no footing, no precision of judgment or clarity of relevant anaylsis.

3. Consider in the third place the area of vocation. The word derives from a Latin verb meaning "to call." The proper function of one's vocation is to be a calling: an area of self-fulfillment in which training and skills are utilized for the commonweal. There is little doubt that for many their work is something by which they are driven, not something to which they are called. The person who has mastered the "calling" concept of vocation in his own present and actual role—whether it be that of student, teacher, artist, butcher or baker, housewife or salesman—is one who has been spiritually released from a bondage that chains many another.

Now for work to be truly vocation, one must be able to believe that it does indeed minister to the good of others; that it suits his own abilities; that there is possibility within it for growth and refinement of his capabilities; and that it yields values that interweave in the social fabric, adding to the cohesive strength and emerging patterns of beauty in life's growing tapestry. It is not easy to preserve the sense of vocation when one is enmeshed in the round of daily duties, when the community of one's fellows seems not to value the work being done, or when frustrations involved in getting it done at all are multiplied. But fundamentally the sense of vocation is something the individual must achieve and preserve. It is not community conferred. For that is applause, and it is precisely the skilled workman who knows that applause and recognition have no infallible relation with worth. As Thoreau put it: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." To have a calling is to step to some music which you—and perhaps you alone—hear.

Well, there are three areas of modern life, among many that might be listed, where you find the value vacuum in evidence. In stating these examples I have already made some suggestions as to at least partial solutions available to us. That is one of the inevitable by-products of serious analysis. What are some additional answers that we might propose?

IV

Before adding other suggestions, I would like to suggest one main idea: those people in our society who have a particular interest in and responsibility for the realization of values in human lives and in the community have a most important task. Whether in the school, the home, the voluntary association or the church, theirs is the privilege not only of sensitizing their own spirits, but of communicating this awareness, awakening this appreciation, maintaining these affirmations that make life interestingly worthwhile. If it be true, even in small degree, that mankind has lost the former vision and been left without a present one, what more important or exciting calling could we ask for than to awaken and renew the vision?

1. The first suggestion I have to offer is this: intensification of relationships rather than multiplication of them.

Since the condition strikes us as emptiness, as rather like a vacuum, it is natural to attempt to fill it. But since the problem is centered in how we are related to events and meanings around us, mere multiplication of attachments makes more acute the hollowness at the center of these ties, that is, in ourselves. So to the lonely person, increasing the size of the crowd around him merely intensifies the loneliness. Yet this is precisely the mistake that we make, when we multiply our involvements.

Confronted with an impossible quantity of knowledge, with ever increasing numbers of available activities, with

communicative devices of ever greater range of possibilities, the signal importance of selectivity is imperative. The picture that is immediately suggested is that of a student surrounded by, say, a radio, TV, tape recoredr, telephone, all going at once, and naturally the result is an impossible jumble, although any one of these by itself might be very good. It is revealing of our problem that we express spiritual malaise by such phrases as "fed up" and "had it."

Frank Lloyd Wright once said, "We are compelled to see, looking back upon this vast homogenous human record, that the human race built most nobly when limitations were greatest and therefore when most was required of imagination in order to build at all." Well, we have now the great problem of self-imposed limitation, to decide, that is, what we will be tuned in to. And what we have got to learn is that when our receptive apparatus receives a jumble, which is thereby meaningless and all confusion, the answer is not to tune in to still more things, but to exercise selectivity. It was recognition of this that led Whitehead to exclaim: "value is limitation."

Now a value relationship is one which nourishes the appreciations and reenforces the positive meanings of life. I am trying to avoid tying this presentation to any one theory of the nature of value, because to the extent that there is a value vacuum, the problem remains under every definition of value as a practical problem. But I believe these characteristics manifest themselves around values regardless of the theory one holds: shared, the significance of authentic values increases; recalled, the value experience proves durable, or, as the New Testament puts it, they "perish not with the using"; anticipated, they merit considered sacrifice. The forms of beauty, goodness and truth, love and justice, dignity and generosity, are manifold, but we relate ourselves meaningfully to any of them not by multiplication but intensification of the relationship.

2. The second suggestion is that we require some positive affirmations rather than merely defensive protections. An affirmation is something that you say "yea" to with your life; it is something by which you are willing to live, for which you are willing to sacrifice, to which you give energetic purpose. This, in large measure, in fact, defines who you are and gives the core of selfhood substance.

It is sobering to consider how many "anti" organizations there are these days or to observe how many people you hear who are long on what they are against, while exceedingly vague as to what they are for. This may be good strategy in social games, but it is not a good program for a man's life. It is the approach of Clarence Darrow's celebrated remark, "I can debate anything in the negative," or of the man elected to his church board, whose acceptance speech was: "As long as I'm a member of this board there ain't nothin' goin' to pass unanimous." I make no brief against the importance of negativism on occasion or criticism that is to the point, only that they are not the stuff of which a value-related life can be made. Eugene Youngert, as Superintendent of the Oak Park Township High School, put the matter very well a number of years ago:

> We need so to teach our boys and girls as to help them develop spirits and minds so free that they simply cannot be intimidated, bought or seduced . . . We need to teach each student as an individual and not merely as a unit in the herd. If we are to do this we must fight the 'mass mind' and its demands for blind loyalty, with no question of good or bad. To do this, we must believe in the individual and the realizable sense of personal integrity inherent in him as a son of God.

By negatives we clarify and define. There is no question about the need for them. It remains that they cannot be nourishing roots, those invisible ties that carry strengthened meanings into

the mind and spirit. Nor can mere positive, look on the bright side, habits do this. Only an affirmation, that reaches out and grasps its object and relates this meaning to the center of one's being can do this. Without some positive affirmations it is inescapable that the dominant sense of life must be one of emptiness.

3. Finally, there must be a vision that is more than the calculating inspection. By "vision' I mean a view that extends beyond your reach, that involves good for more than yourself, that justifies life even though it be unattained. This is what marks the difference between the man who is **dismayed** by the fact that his own work will inevitably be incomplete and imperfect and the man who is **sustained** by the same fact. Rabbi Tarphon's dictum, "The work is not upon thee to finish, nor art thou free to desist from it," is a curse to the man of caluclation only, a benediction to the man of vision. So William James: "The great thing is to spend life for something that outlasts it."

It is only some such larger setting for one's work that can make it a vocation, and setting of one's life that can redeem its evil days and bring to resolution its sharp dissonances. All great teachers have known that in the midst of imparting facts and awakening understanding, they must also inspire some further vision. For it is this that releases imagination and gives perspective. Among the best statements of what this sort of education is about, is this found in Whitehead's **Aims of Education:**

> The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning. The university imparts information but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purpose.[5]

If there is anything like "the value vacuum," the problem is not fill it with things, so as to distract us from the sense of emptiness, it is rather to open the windows of the soul, to sensitize the receptive apparatus of mind and imagination, not so much to create a vision as to open the eyes to that vision —in part each man's own and in part supported by tough realism—as to what life can be, and therefore what his place in it and contribution to it must be. To have even a small part in helping people open their lives to the values awaiting their discovery is as great a privilege as life can bestow.

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[5] Op. cit., New York, Macmillan, 1929, p. 139.