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Is Human Life Itself a Value?*

Few philosophers have defended the "quality of life" point of view with greater tenacity and courage than Sidney Hook. Long before it became fashionable to defend the right to suicide, Hook argued that death is often our friend and that, under certain circumstances, choosing to end our own life "would be a legitimate means to attain our ends, often a praiseworthy means, and sometimes even an obligatory means. . . ."¹ Similarly, Hook has been a great champion of the intelligent resistance to tyranny. He has vigorously defended the right (if not the obligation) to resist tyranny, even if that resistance results in a threat to our own life.² The great enemy is the fear of death, because it is tantamount to the fear of living well if there should be any resistance, even moderate resistance, to doing so. For history and the long sweep of human experience has demonstrated that, when mere survival becomes a fetish, not only is the good life with its higher forms of excellence sacrificed, but meaningful life as well.

In other words, the melioristic pragmatist maintains that it is not life as bare subsistence, but the good life, that is the object of intellectual endeavor.

Paradoxical as it may sound, life itself is not a value. What gives life value is not its mere existence but its quality. Whoever proclaims that life is worth living under any circumstances has already written for himself an epitaph of infamy. For there is no principle or human being he will not betray; there is no indignity he will not suffer or compound.³

Thus for the pragmatist, life is important only as the condition and opportunity for the good life, and he prefers not to live at all if he must live under certain circumstances.

All these points are important and most are well taken. Extreme vitalists and "quantity of lifers" are largely mistaken. Contrary to what they suggest,

* Sidney Hook -- philosopher of Democracy and Humanism, ed. by P. Kurtz, Buffalo,

the fear of death and the conviction that life is worth living under any circumstances is not conducive to, or even supportive of, a meaningful or a good life. To tell the poor, the needy, or the oppressed that they should be content with whatever they may have as long as they can live is not merely worship of the status quo but a mockery of the ideal of excellence and the very notion of human dignity.

The vitalist and his like are also mistaken as to the nature of this value. Life is not an absolute value. Even Albert Schweitzer was willing to kill certain life forms in order to save others. And Gandhi, the patron saint of twentieth-century pacifism, a man who abhorred almost all forms of killing, writes:

I see there is an instinctive horror of killing beings under any circumstances whatever. . . . [But] should my child be attacked with rabies and there was no helpful remedy to relieve his agony, I should consider it my duty to take his life.⁴

We may define morality differently, but no matter what our conception of the good is, if we do not corrupt or destroy the notion of friendship and the notion of a lesser evil, death is often found to be a friend or, at least, the lesser of two evils.

Nor is it true, once we escape from the self-serving metaphysical fiat, from the presupposition that all being must somehow be good, that unhappy existence is always better than death because life, even at its worst, is always better than nonexistence.⁵ Notice my objection is not to the claim that men generally prefer existence to nonexistence but rather to the claim that they *always do so* or that they *always ought to do so*. For the evidence indicates that human beings generally prefer life to death. So that if the mode be an empirical one, it is difficult to see how one can honor truth, and when confronted with the claim, proceed to deny that most humans, by their very actions, show they prefer some of the most meager (but not meaningless) forms of human existence—lives of endless toil and hardship, slavery or near slavery, and even great mental or physical disability—to that of death.

The other large area of agreement concerns the value of intelligent resistance. Hook correctly insists that a rational and high-minded being may prefer resistance to surrender, even death to a life of complete and utter degradation. That mere survival is not to be made a fetish. That

No man can win freedom unless he conquers his fear of death. No nation can preserve its freedom unless it is willing to risk destruction in its defense. . . . [That] the free society from Pericles to the present has survived because it has valued some thing more than survival, because of its vision of human excellence, dignity and joy has made some kinds of life unworthy of man.⁶

Yet for all the vitality and great power of Hook's position something is wrong. It is well not to overestimate the value of life. But it is not well to underestimate its value or to argue in a manner as to give the impression that

only life at its fullest or near fullest is worth living. And it does not seem right to say that only the good life is worth living and that life itself is not of value.

Following Dewey and Hook, I shall say that in empirical fact the measure of value a person attaches to a given end is not what he *says* about its preciousness but the care he devotes to obtaining and using the *means* without which it cannot be attained or adequately protected.⁷ Thus, to value an object is to be disposed to actively behave in such a way as to achieve, sustain, or enhance the welfare of that object. Now it would take us far afield to discuss the question of the good and the truth of the form of ideal utilitarianism I wish to support, viz., the marriage of a plurality of ideals, including open ideals, with the pluck and will to achieve and defend them. What is relevant, however, is to note that there are advantages to not equating goodness with value, as Dewey and Hook appear to do. Briefly stated, what are the advantages of not identifying goodness with value, as value is here defined? First and foremost, it enables us to intelligently discuss those objects that may not be presently valued. Second, it allows us to account for mistakes in valuation, such as when something is initially judged to be of value but then it is discovered that the benefits are meager and the costs are irrationally high. And finally it enables us to avoid the Charybdis of a rigid Aristotelianism, the notion of a predetermined limited number of ends inherently arranged in a rigidly fixed order of increasing comprehensiveness and finality, *and* the Scylla of an empty behaviorism.

The following seems to be true. First, human beings, by their actions, do generally value life. They do generally strive to defeat, or at least postpone, death. Perhaps they ought not. Perhaps they should only value the good life. But that is a different question. The question before us is whether life itself is of value and not whether it ought to be of value.

Second, since human life as a normal biological fact is of value, it is not fully accurate to say that human life itself is not of value. Strictly speaking, what is generally not of value is not life itself, but irrevocably meaningless existence. What is generally not of value is a life so irretrievably blasted by accident, malady, or birth so as not to warrant rational hope.

The third point relates to the claim that only the good life is worth living. Philosophers, following Aristotle, are generally intoxicated with the idea of the good life. They repeatedly claim that it is not life itself that is worth living, but only the good life. They tend to forget that, for Aristotle, the good life presupposes a fairly high and relatively rare level of human achievement. They also seem to forget that if Aristotle's doctrine of the good life is strictly adhered to, and if the injunction be true, then it follows that the lives of most human beings are not worth living.

Surely something is amiss here. Failure to achieve the good life does not, in itself, result in degradation and obloquy. Perhaps the achievement of a full life is an important end. But a life that is not full is not necessarily empty. And a life that is neither fully nor richly meaningful is not meaningless. Fortunately for most human beings, there are various levels of meaningful life between

bare subsistence and the good life. Although they may not be of intrinsic value, they are typically found to be sufficient to sustain the souls of most men and are, therefore, of value.

NOTES

1. Sidney Hook, "The Ethics of Suicide," *International Journal of Ethics*, 37 (1927), 178. Reprinted in *Beneficent Euthanasia*, ed. by Marvin Kohl (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1975), pp. 57-69.
2. Sidney Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 12. For similar statements, also see *ibid.*, p. 53, and "The Ethics of Suicide," *op. cit.*, p. 186.
3. Sidney Hook, "A Foreign Policy for Freedom and Survival," *Political Power and Personal Freedom* (New York: Criterion Books, 1959), p. 426.
4. Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, Nov. 18, 1926, quoted in *The Essential Gandhi*, ed. by Louis Fischer (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 216.
5. St. Augustine, *The Problem of Free Choice* (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, and London: Longmans, Green, 1955), bk. 3, pp. 158-64.
6. Sidney Hook, *Political Power and Personal Freedom*, p. 445.
7. Cf. John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 27.