Letters

Population Ethics

Daniel Callahan's article "Ethics and population limitation" (4 Feb., p. 487) is most timely in directing our attention to a consideration of those values which should underlie the formulation and evaluation of policies of all kinds. Many social and environmental problems result from a failure to come to grips with such matters. However, the ethical guidelines suggested in Callahan's essay are not convincing.

Given the scope of the population problem alone, Callahan's argument necessarily assumes that key values are common to different cultures. But this quality is not claimed for his freedom, justice, and security-survival. On the contrary, their association with Western culture is conceded (p. 488); our concepts of freedom and justice are especially subject to this limitation.

Callahan does not distinguish sharply among the three values discussed, but he does rank freedom first. This decision is particularly suspect. Despite its dearness to us and the international pronouncements cited by Callahan in its support, freedom has been accepted so infrequently or has existed in such different guises as to be extremely difficult to invoke as a universal. Even in the West, freedom has dominated a limited number of situations. Yet, people within tyrannical societies have been no less human, and they have often contributed significantly to the human enterprise. Important though it is, there is little evidence that freedom is the primary human value or, for that matter, a prerequisite for many kinds of human progress. The same weaknesses affect "distributive justice," which, as Callahan's concerns about protecting the poor suggest, we are far from achieving.

Security-survival, on the other hand, seems well suited as the primary value upon which to found population and other policies, especially if we adopt a world view. (Callahan's imperatives for individual and governmental behavior are weakened by not being subordinated to species-wide priorities.) Security-survival is a nearly universal value. It is unlikely to be distorted beyond recognition by different cultures. And without it the human experience is at an end, a fact which makes all other values dependent upon (and logically subordinate to) the surety of security-survival. Today, when the continuation of mankind itself is in question, other values must relinquish past claims to primacy. A broadly defined concept of survival sufficient for now and the future will not ignore such values as freedom and justice, if by survival we mean truly human survival. Survival in these terms requires that we advance those qualities and activities unique to humanity and insure conditions for their well-being in the years ahead. A comprehensive and ordered ethics should guide us in this task.

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Callahan is critical of strong measures to control population on the ground that "other values" are threatened by such controls. He concludes (reference 25, p. 494) that "an ethic of survival, at the cost of other basic human values, is not worth the cost."

Some of us, it is true, believe that we would rather die than live under brutish conditions. The question is whether we act this way when confronted with the choice. More important, the question is how many others, now and in the future, would prefer "human dignity" to survival. It is no denigration of the power of moral belief to observe that an empty stomach knows no morals.

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Callahan states (p. 490) that "individuals have the right to freedom of procreative choice. . . ." His sole legal support for this legal conclusion is the Declaration of the 1968 U.N. International Conference on Human Rights (*1*) that couples have a basic human right to decide "freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children. . . ." Callahan fails to notice the important fact that by definition the right extends only to "responsible" choices. The right to reproduce is not and never has been an unlimited right. No legal document, national or international, gives a blank check to the Old Women Who Lived in a Shoe.

Callahan also states (p. 490) that the Ehrlichs' suggestion for population control is "manifestly coercive." The Ehrlichs' passage quoted by Callahan shows clearly that they do not support coercive programs, except, if at all, as a last resort. The entire thrust of the Ehrlichs' efforts have been to avoid compulsion through the immediate institution of effective voluntary programs.

Callahan suggests that coercive programs (including economic incentives and disincentives) cannot be used until voluntary methods have been tried and found wanting. The suggestion is based on his value judgment that human freedom is more important than human survival. That is not a judgment on which everyone can agree. Freedom without survival is meaningless to many. Furthermore, as a matter of law his statement is incorrect. Governments could proceed with coercive programs without first trying voluntary ones, if it were shown that a legislator could reasonably believe that control was necessary for survival and that it was already too late for voluntarism to be effective. This is yet another reason why effective voluntary programs must be instituted at once.

Finally, in discussing the right to choose to have children, Callahan falls into the very common error of treating the right as if it were a single, indivisible right. As I (*2*) and others (*3*) have shown, the right has many components, each of which must be analyzed individually. There may be a right to choose to reproduce, a right to have one child, a right to have two children, a right to have a boy and a girl, a right to have three children, a right to replace a deceased child, a right to have a healthy child, and so forth. But each right has limits. Under the authority of the Supreme Court, the

exercise of even the right to have one child may, under appropriate circumstances, be denied by compulsory sterilization (*4*).

With a more complete understanding of the legal background, Callahan's basic thesis that the population problem poses threats to many values becomes more compelling than even he seems to have realized.

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References

1. Final Act of the International Conference on Human Rights (United Nations, New York, 1968).
2. J. C. Montgomery, *Hastings Law J.* **22**, 629, 654 (1971).
3. "Legal analysis and population control: The problem of coercion," *Harv. Law. Rev.* **84**, 1856 (1971).
4. See *Buck v. Bell* 274 U.S. 200 (1917).

Daniel Callahan defends (reference 9, p. 494) the right to breed, as defined by the Declaration of the 1968 United Nations International Conference on Human Rights. He asks the question ". . . why is only the freedom to control family size to be removed from the list?" (of life, liberty, and so forth).

This question is easily answered. That the answer is not yet apparent to all is merely a consequence of the fact that the population has not yet reached that level where the birth of each infant is the immediate precursor of its death by starvation or cannibalism.

We note that the right to kill is not included in the United Nations Declaration. Symmetry of logic demands that the right to breed must similarly be excluded. The time is near, if not already present, when death is good and birth is bad. In our limited experience we have not yet been forced to face this side of the equation.

Individuals, like gas molecules, are inhibited by their congeners. As gas molecules are made free by vacuum, individuals are freed by lowering population levels, and even the right to freely associate is limited to optimum population levels.

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Callahan has made a calm and logical analysis of population ethics. However, its emphasis is one-sided, almost implying that population control should be considered solely to avoid extinction in the far future. He has not considered enough how overpopulation is destroying, in a complex way, many extremely valuable things in our lives even now.

For 30 years I have irritatedly felt that the traditional freedom of procreators has taken away from me many freedoms that I love passionately. I have been forced to make extra efforts to search and afford a relatively clean and spacious home environment, at the same time feeling guilty about "unjustly" enjoying things that others only now may vaguely miss.

Overpopulation is now causing, in every city, an incalculable amount of suffering, even if the direct victims, having little choice, seldom are aware of it. Think of the apathy, hostility, neurosis, deprivation, sickness, crime, and poverty that threaten not only security but also justice and freedom. It would be cynical to maintain that a slum dweller can genuinely use the freedoms he may have in theory. When the population of a nation outstrips its resources, all three of Callahan's principal values are threatened. Computer economists are now predicting a sudden global catastrophe with problems that have never been experienced before. The world is nearing a chaotic situation where the magnitude and complexity of the difficulties are unmanageable, even with grossly coercive population control. It seems that Callahan has almost ignored two factors: (i) the exponential character of population growth and hence the lack of time to solve the rapidly worsening crisis and (ii) the ramified economic and social consequences with lots of feedback. Population control is unworkable without simultaneous social reform.

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In most of the discussions by scientists about the importance in population control of freedom of choice, the authors sound more like primitive theologians than scientists. Callahan is no exception. Callahan's argument is that we now have freedom of choice, but any change from the status quo designed to limit family size would reduce this freedom. This is quite literally absurd. There are now many pressures on people everywhere to have multiple offspring; while these pressures differ from one society to another, the pressures include both incentives to have many offspring and deterrents to remain childless; in the sense of Thomas Aquinas, no one is now free to choose. Resistance to change in the social structure phrased as loss of freedom of choice is actually resistance to using human intelligence to solve our social problems. I for one would greatly prefer to see our population problems solved in a human way rather than in one of the "God-given" ways, that is, by natural calamity, war, pestilence, or starvation.

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The main quarrel a number of the critics have with my argument is that I give too much weight to freedom and too little to security-survival. I am quite willing to concede my bias in favor of freedom as a primary value. On the one hand, I am not convinced that the world situation is so desperate that this bias cannot rationally be sustained. And, on the other hand, so much evil has been done in the name of security-survival (for example, a nuclear arms race, genocidal acts) that a good deal of wariness toward what I would call the "tyranny of survival" is well justified. Johnson is quite correct that freedom is not a universal value (ask the Medvedev brothers), and no less correct that "distributive justice" is far from realization. But is this a good or bad situation? I think it is a bad situation, one we are not forced to bless simply because that's the way life is. Nettler is no doubt also correct in observing that morals often give way when survival is at stake. But sometimes they don't, which is why it remains possible to be hopeful about human nature. Montgomery is also right in his observation that legislatures can, in the name of survival, override claims to freedom. A sad truth, as many minority groups in our society can testify.

Vaartaja's letter raises another kind of issue—the extent to which overpopulation poses threats to the quality of life and the general welfare. I am, I must concede, far more sympathetic with this line of criticism than with that based on the need for security-survival. We may survive excessive population growth, but not well. However, it is unfortunate that Vaartaja repeats one of the most simplistic of all notions about population growth,

that it is the cause of all our urban woes, a thesis lacking empirical support.

Humphreys is incorrect in asserting that I claimed freedom of choice now exists. I said that it is a value which should be given primacy, under the aegis of voluntaristic information and contraception programs. The work of implementing that value has hardly begun.

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Research Natural Areas

In his article "Natural areas" (4 Aug., p. 396), William Moir refers briefly to a publication that should receive more attention. *A Directory of Research Natural Areas on Federal Lands of the United States of America* (*1*) is a list of more than 300 research natural areas with their descriptions, locations, and individual information sources. It is cross-referenced by type, state, and species of note and serves as an announcement of the availability of natural areas for appropriate use by scientists and educators.

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Reference

1. Federal Commitee on Research Natural Areas, *A Directory of Research Natural Areas on Federal Lands of the United States of America* (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1968).

Safety at Rocky Flats

Donald Michels (Letters, 21 July, p. 208) takes issue with Deborah Shapley's disturbing report (News and Comment, 5 Nov. 1971, p. 569) on safety at Dow Chemical Company's Rocky Flats plutonium plant in Colorado. Michels is on the Rocky Flats staff (an affiliation not mentioned in his letter) and thus is hardly a disinterested observer.

Michels appeals to the reader to imagine that plutonium plant safety has evolved somewhat over the past 25 years and that there is no inconsistency in the claims of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) that the Rocky