Letters

The Troubled Waters of Politics and Morality

Please allow me to make Leary's letter (25 Nov.) an occasion to endorse your policy of including in *Science* a broad range of subject matter of interest to the scientist—not only as a scientist but also as a citizen and a human being. The deletion of a prefix from Leary's opening statement expresses my feelings: "It seems most (in) appropriate to me that your journal has embarked upon the troubled waters of politics and morality." While I do not wish to dispute Leary's specific contention in relation to your coverage of the renewed interest in the Sobell case, I feel his beginning assumption threatens the source of the real excellence of *Science,* those characteristics which make it something more than a "journal" in the strict sense of the word. Leary suggests that "the business of *Science* should be science" only, but I very much agree with your editorial policy of including coverage of those things which are the business of scientists qua citizens in this world at this time. Hesitancy to speak out on matters of politics and morality is too characteristic of practicing scientists.

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The American Anthropological Association as an assembly of private citizens has a right to adopt any resolution it chooses. As a scientific body, however, its adoption of a resolution on matters outside of its (and presumably most of its members') technical competence is in extremely questionable taste. As an association of educated people, incidentally, the AAA should be embarrassed by promulgation of such an illogical and poorly worded statement.

In any case, publication of the AAA resolution by *Science* (23 Dec., p. 1525), especially in a box focusing attention on it, was a mistake. Printing of political statements, except in editorial text discussing their effect on the scientific community, is inappropriate in a scientific journal, even a liberal one which routinely deals editorially with matters of opinion.

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Although I am no happier about the war in Vietnam and the American involvement than my fellow anthropologists and, I suspect, most other Americans, I feel that an indefensible statement was made in the name of the American Anthropological Association. I refer specifically to the core sentence of the AAA's Vietnam resolution, "These methods of warfare deeply offend human nature." The condemned methods are "the use of napalm, chemical defoliants, harmful gases, bombing, the torture and killing of prisoners of war and political prisoners, and the intentional or deliberate policies of genocide or forced transportation of populations. . . ."

I am not questioning any American's right to condemn warfare or any of its aspects, but I do feel that this cannot justifiably be done in the name of anthropology. If I were to see such a statement coming from a group of historians, or English literature professors, or economists, or even sociologists, I would not be particularly shocked. I would merely, perhaps with a small feeling of smugness, think that they were culture-bound and could think only in terms of Western values. But from an official representation of anthropologists I find this resolution amazing. We are the people who have prided ourselves, and with considerable justification, on studying and reporting the most diverse forms of behavior found among men, while always assiduously assuring our students that we cannot judge the customs of other people according to our own morality. The varieties of killing we have described (without moral judgment) in our books and classes make a long list. There are the practices of Filipino headhunters, the bloody ritual killings by the Aztecs in which the hearts were torn out of living men, the many varieties of cannibalism, the deliberate crushing of slaves under house poles on the Northwest Coast, female infanticide, the ritual killing of widows over their husbands' funeral pyres in India, the abandonment of old Eskimos in the middle of the Arctic winter, to name only a few such customs. I recently saw the film, "Dead Birds," in which an anthropologist from an august institution depicted in great detail the fighting and killing practices of two New Guinea tribes. No moral judgment was pronounced despite the fact that one of the two killings shown was that of a boy who was speared to death only because he was caught defenseless by the other side. I have serious doubts that it is easier to die from spears than from bomb explosions or napalm.

My contention is that we in anthropology have trained ourselves to study man's behavior, regardless of its variety and despite our own cultural biases. This is one of our major strengths in which we have created a new role for ourselves, our professional "culture free" self. At the same time, we have had to carry along the role of humanitarian, egalitarian, and democratic American, a role which we possessed before becoming anthropologists. In these two roles, we have had to be chameleons to a considerable extent, but we have done this better than men of any other profession. If we start mixing the two roles we will soon have little that is original to offer the scientific world. Furthermore, I think that we are dangerously mixing these roles in the aforesaid statement.

How can we say these forms of warfare deeply offend human nature rather than the ideals of middle-class liberal Americans, reflecting Judeo-Christian ethics? Does eating human flesh deeply offend the human nature of a cannibal? Did the ritual killing offend the human nature of an Aztec? Or to use more modern examples, does burning out the eyes of a young Ibo man offend the human nature of a Hausa? Or does cutting out the tongue of a village chief in Vietnam offend the human nature of a Viet Cong? Or are these people not human? I maintain that we don't know well what human nature is, though we anthropologists know more of its variety than men of other professions. But we certainly do not improve

our chances for finding out what it is by assuming that it is the same as that agreed upon by middle-class American liberals, not to mention what we do to the study of anthropology.

Therefore, I say we must keep these roles separate. We can condemn forms of warfare in Vietnam or anywhere else as much as we like but we must do this as middle-class American liberals or as humanitarians, or as theologians, or as whatever other class is applicable, but not as anthropologists, or at least not until we know a lot more about the limits of human nature than we do today. And when we do decide we know enough to say what offends human nature, we had better include the values and beliefs of some of the people we study in making our judgments, even if they are contrary to the precepts of Judeo-Christian ethics.

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Ably Elucidated Precepts

My sincerest congratulations to Wolfle on his discernment of the necessity to admonish those intent on scholarly publication, whether for pedagogical purposes, for transmission of investigative disclosures, or for the establishment of standardized compendia of serviceable data, to refrain from the employment of glottologically superfluous or, in other words, unnecessarily verbose (i.e., insufficiently laconic) modes of exposition. His editorial (27 Jan., "Bad writing," p. 407) (q.v.) infused me with a profound desire to divest my expository compositions of all vestiges of pedantry and ambiguity, and I shall endeavor to adhere to the estimable precepts so ably elucidated therein.

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When Science is Palatable

René Dubos remarks (Editorial, 4 Nov., p. 595) that "Scientific problems should be presented to the general public from several points of view. . . . It is essential also that scientists discuss more thoroughly in public the implications of their findings. . . ." In the same issue J. P. Scott touches off a scathing review of Lorenz' *On Aggression* (p. 636) with the remark that it is "only 50 percent science." This raises the point: is it better to reach a wide public with a 50 percent product (provided the remainder is not anti-science) or to produce a refined, 100 percent product and not reach the public at all? Lorenz' success in communicating with nonprofessionals leads me to wonder if his manner of presenting a personal view of certain ideas and their implications may not be worth emulating. What Scott calls romanticism may be one of several necessary recipes for palatability. Let us face it: the public is uninterested in that which is unattractive, incomprehensible, or remote from their own lives; we cannot reach them by spouting formulae, however beautiful the formulae may seem to us. Scott describes Lorenz' books as "children's books," which they are not. So long as we equate nonscientists with children, we are not likely to be listened to in any case.

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Origins of the Lean and Hungry Effort

Bok and Kovach bewail the lack of drive in doctoral candidates (Letters, 4 Nov.; 23 Dec.) but the phenomenon is easily explained. It is the psychological effect of the business cycle. Bok graduated in 1930; Kovach then was 8 years old. The sudden collapse of the economic system, the unemployment, and the breadlines left their generation with the feeling that work is a privilege and sacred.

The young lads who are in their early 20's now have never known anything other than plenty. Work? There are hundreds of jobs available—nobody *they* know has ever been out of a job. And salaries always run to a car and a house and furniture to fill it. What are the oldsters worried about?

And *their* children, to whom nobody will ever talk about depressions, will be hit by want, deprivation, and penury in the middle 1980's, which will leave indelible mental scars and a driving attitude to work. Thus the Wheel of Life turns full cycle.

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