

FACT AND VALUE

by Henry Nelson Wieman

I have been asked to comment on that issue of *Zygon* (March 1969) devoted to showing that fact and value involve one another. I fully agree with the general import of the discussion. Under certain conditions facts are values and values are facts. But certain features of the problem I see somewhat differently from the way some of the participants in the discussion do. In the letter asking me to participate, the problem is stated in the form of two questions: Can values be derived from facts? Can science reveal and clarify human values?

The first of these two questions suggests an order of priority which I would reverse. First of all, values are not derived from facts, but facts are derived from values. Only after facts have been thus derived can they be resolved again into values.

VALUES AS GOAL-SEEKING ACTIVITIES

I understand value to be any goal-seeking activity. When this activity is actually lived and not analyzed into its component parts, it is a value. Facts emerge when the goal is examined as though it stood by itself and was not merged into the activity, as it is when lived apart from analysis. The same is true when the activity is examined as though it stood by itself and was not the living embodiment of the goal, as it is when actually lived. Facts emerge when any of the essential parts of the goal-seeking activity, or any of its required conditions, are examined analytically and not merged into the goal-seeking activity itself.

Facts are the analytically derived component parts of value when value is the goal-seeking activity. But these facts can be taken up again into goal-seeking activities and merge into values. Even a goal-seeking activity, viewed in abstraction and lifted out of the system in which it functions as a value, does in this abstract form become a fact. Any element that might be analyzed out of the goal-seeking activity, and examined as a unit in itself, is a fact.

This analytical procedure, by which the human intellect commonly seeks knowledge, exposes the realm of fact because facts are elements

Henry Nelson Wieman is professor emeritus of Christian theology, University of Chicago.

lifted out of the goal-seeking activities in which they are originally experienced.

Scientific inquiry is itself a goal-seeking activity and therefore a value. But when it is analyzed into its component parts and these parts are viewed in segregation from one another, it is a fact. Scientific inquiry as actually lived by the scientist seeking to solve some problem is a value. But when scientific inquiry is examined as something common to the field of science and therefore not in the particular living form of a scientist engaged in solving a problem, it is a fact. All abstractions are facts when abstraction means some component abstracted from the concrete goal-seeking activity as lived by some organism, human or subhuman.

All accumulated knowledge is fact except when it is taken up into the goal-seeking activities of some living organism. Since knowledge can be used in the conduct of goal-seeking activity, it can be said to have value, but only in this secondary way. When a particular bit of knowledge is sought in the goal-seeking activity of a scientist, it is the goal essential to the goal-seeking activity of that scientist at that time and is thus an element in the value. But when the goal is attained and stands on its own in the found knowledge, independent of the inquiry which produced it, it is factual knowledge. Also, when the factual knowledge accumulated by scientific inquiry is taken into other goal-seeking activities, it becomes an element in those activities which are values.

Thus scientific inquiry is itself a value and can also make unlimited contribution to other values. By analysis of goal-seeking activities, and by exposing their required conditions and consequences, science can "reveal and clarify values," which is the second question I am asked to answer.

ESTABLISHING RELATIONS AMONG GOAL-SEEKING ACTIVITIES

Perhaps the greatest contribution science can make to values is to show how goal-seeking activities can be related to one another in ways that are mutually sustaining and mutually meaningful. Human life finds its greatest value in that kind of relation among goal-seeking activities wherein the activities with which the individual identifies himself are so related to some expanding system of activity pervading society and history that what he does here and now has for him the value of this expanding system to which his present activities contribute.

The apathetic individual can always say: That kind of relation of goal-seeking activities has no value for me. He speaks correctly because

the activities with which he identifies himself are not related in the way required. But here we have a question of fact. The psychological and social sciences seem to have demonstrated that when the individual does identify himself with activities organically connected with a wide-ranging and expanding system of mutually sustaining and mutually meaningful activities, he does find value in his living. So long as this is a mere fact, that is, so long as it is not lived as an actual goal-seeking activity, the individual may see no value in it. Hence he is correct in saying he sees no value in it. This is one example of the difference between fact and value.

Our civilization seems to have developed in such a way that increasing numbers are unable to find this meaningful relation between the activities with which they identify themselves and the major developments of society and history. I believe modern science is partly to blame for this because modern technology, developing out of modern science, has produced vast complexities having no meaningfully felt relation to the activities with which increasing numbers of individuals identify themselves. The correction of this state of affairs will require a transformation both in the activities with which individuals identify themselves and also in the order of society so as to bring the developments of society and the activities with which the individuals identify into meaningful relation.

The individual might make an important contribution to the social process, but if he does not identify himself with the activities making this contribution, his contribution does not make life meaningful for him.

DISCOVERING THE CONDITIONS OF INTERACTION BETWEEN THE ACTIVITIES OF LIFE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

So far I have discussed the problem running through the March 1969 issue of *Zygon*. Now I turn to Ralph Wendell Burhoe's special contribution, which he has asked me to criticize. Here, as usual, I find myself in enthusiastic agreement with most of what he says about fact and value. But at the end of his paper he brings forth a point that has always been in dispute between us. I shall state this point by quoting his own words because I may misinterpret his meaning, in which case my disagreement arises from a misunderstanding and so may not be valid. The point at issue is on pages 95-97, under the subhead "External Sanctions of Human Values":

Thus the ultimate human values are the transhuman values of what the sciences would call the total environment that evoked and selected the evolving

patterns of life. . . . Upon this ultimate and almighty power man is completely dependent. He has no life and no future . . . if he fails at any point to bow down to its "will," that is, to seek to adapt to what this all-encompassing reality requires of him if he is to have life. [Pp. 96-97]

. . . and nothing can escape the conditions set by the "real" world—the ultimate judge or selector—which the sciences have revealed. [P. 96]

. . . the amoeba, the worm, the mammal, man, and the transhuman electronic computer are all leveled and one—all become interrelated and interdependent participants in one grand ecological whole that is clearly moving forward in time and in grandeur. [P. 97]

I think these quotations give the substance of what is in dispute. As I understand him, Mr. Burhoe is saying that the environment external to living organisms selects what shall survive and what shall not. As I see it, this is not true. What determines survival is interaction between the organism and its environment. This interaction transforms both the environment and the living pattern of the organism enabling it to survive or not survive. As we advance in the scale of evolution, this interaction between organisms and between them and their total environment becomes increasingly potent in determining the survival of the prevailing pattern of life. When we come to human life and modern civilization, this interaction between individuals, societies of individuals, and all human culture, with the total environment, has vastly more power to transform—either creatively or destructively—both the pattern of human life and the total environment.

Therefore it seems to me mistaken to say that the total environment apart from human activity (or human activity apart from the total environment) determines what form of life shall survive and what shall not. On the contrary, it is interaction between the two that "judges" and "selects."

For example, what most dangerously threaten human existence at the present time are atomic weapons in war, pollution of the environment, and overpopulation. But these are the work of interaction between man and his total environment and are not produced by either one apart from the other.

For this reason I distinguish the kind of interaction which transforms human life toward the greater good as creative interaction, in contrast with kinds that fail to meet the tests of survival and fail to expand the range of what man can control and value.

Throughout the entire range of evolution, from its first beginning, organisms have survived not by grace of the total environment and not by grace of their own activity, but by creative interaction between the

ZYGON

two, whereby an environment is created fit to sustain the living organism and the organism is fitted to live in the environment.

When we come to human life equipped with the powers of modern civilization, this interaction becomes increasingly powerful to destroy and to construct. Therefore, if we are to use the word "God" at all to refer to what calls for the ruling commitment of our lives because it sustains life and transforms it to the greater good, then we should apply the term not to the total environment but to that kind of creative interaction between life and the total environment which expands indefinitely the range and depth of what can be experienced in the form of goal-seeking activities when these sustain one another and mean one another relative to those activities with which individuals identify themselves.

The sanctions, to use Burhoe's expression, which guide life from the ways of death and into the ways of greater value, come not from the total environment alone, or from the activities of life alone, but are the consequences of interaction between the activities of life and the total environment. Hence our basic problem and our primary religious concern should be to find those conditions under which this interaction operates creatively between all forms of life and between life and the total environment. This creative interchange should command our ruling commitment. This ruling commitment is the kind of religion we should have if we are to be saved. The right kind of morality is activity directed to providing the conditions under which this creativity can operate most effectively. The right kind of religion is such commitment to this creativity that we are motivated to act in this moral way.