
COMMENTS

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ENVIRONMENT, QUALITY OF LIFE, AND DEVELOPMENT —SEMANTICS OR TELEOLOGY?

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A great problem with language is that it is ambiguous, and this leads to untold complications in all walks of life.

The ambiguity is to an extent due to our desire to speak concisely in terms of a relatively small vocabulary. As a result, we endow each word with a whole spectrum of meanings. Words which quietly sit in an uncontroversial corner of our attention do not suffer much on account of this ambiguity. But every so often, a word is torn from its peaceful niche, is thrust into the limelight of debates and rhetorics, and immediately its failings become evident and the word falls prey to the special aims, desires and ambitions of the parties in the controversy. Then the battle is on for expropriating the word, for nailing down its meaning according to one's own self-interest. The weapon in this battle is overuse, a constant reiteration in a tendentious context until it is thought that victory is achieved and the word was given the "right" unique meaning.

But such victories are almost always Pyrrhic: the word seldom survives such a battle over its meaning without becoming dead, turning into a cliché, losing its power to participate in meaningful discourse.

Such a disaster befell in recent years the three expressions "environment", "quality of life", and "development". At the risk, therefore, of flagging a dead horse (or, more appropriately, three dead words), I would like to attempt a revitalization of these concepts and an analysis of the ways in which a ceasefire can be declared over their meanings.

Environment

Environment, says Webster's New International Dictionary, means "the surrounding conditions, influences, or forces, which influence or modify". In other words, we deal with that part of the world which surrounds us and has an impact on us.

In further analyzing this word, we immediately encounter what will be one of the central themes of our whole discussion, namely the complexity and multidimensionality (pluralism) of human aspirations, perceptions, and sensitivities. In particular, some of these may be material, while others are non-material. In the case of "environment", the house we live in, the food we eat, the air we breathe, the clothes we wear and many other items represent material aspects, while the music we listen to, the personal freedom we enjoy, the interpersonal relationships we have are examples of non-material elements.

It is not difficult to conclude either from human history or from a look at our world today that in most situations non-material aspirations and sensitivities play a dominant role in governing human behavior. Just to name one simple example, an inspection of the wars and near-wars that exist today between countries or within them indicates that virtually all of them have their primary causes in ideological, spiritual, religious, nationalistic, moral or political controversies. Indeed, the world would be a much easier place to achieve peace in if only material, economic forces were at play between groups of people. In such purely economic disputes a division of the disputed material among the feuding parties could be regarded as an acceptable compromise. In contrast, the very word "compromise" reeks of immorality if looked at from an ideological or moral point of view.

Because of this predominance of our non-material sensitivities, it is in fact often difficult to draw a sharp line between what is material and non-material. For example, the food we eat is seemingly a material subject, and yet "natural food" enthusiasts can turn this earthly matter into a spiritual and aspirational issue. We shall return to this point later.

Going now back to "environment", it is clear that the word may mean almost anything to which we are sensitive in our surroundings. Furthermore, since our sensitivities are so multidimensional, and since sensitivities of different people can be weighted among the various ingredients in drastically different ways, the "true" meaning of "environment" in the discussion so far remains unspecified and the word is up for grabs. We shall see later how the battle over this word resulted in its present degraded and loaded meaning.

Quality of Life

"Quality" in our Webster illustrates well the quandary on account of ambiguities in words: No fewer than 17 different meanings are listed, and each of these is circumscribed by words which, themselves, are ambiguous. Without exploring the full extent of this confusion, let me just say that the way "quality" is used in the heading of this section has to do with the "goodness" or "badness" of life.

Having tied our phrase to the words "good" and "bad", the range of possibilities for meaning immediately becomes almost infinite. And here another central issue in our discussion emerges, one that was also implicit in looking at the word "environment", namely that semantics is closely connected to teleology, to value systems, to personal "philosophies". Indeed, in innumerable cases, the way we use language

simply reflects our personal preferences and dislikes. In other words, language is very often unavoidably "loaded".

Thus good quality of life may mean the opportunity to climb mountains for one person, and strong laws prohibiting dangerous mountain climbing for another. To the automobile fan, it may mean easy access to car racing while it means the absence of noisy vehicles to someone outraged about noise pollution. For the person delighted in an increasingly technological world, quality of life is enhanced by increasing energy production, while to the "antinuk" any decrease in the number of power plants represents a better quality of life. The examples one can bring up constitutes an endless list indeed.

Development

Let us now come to our third abused word, development. Our Webster is equally unhelpful in providing us with an unambiguous definition: The word "development" is defined in terms of the verb "develop", which in turn has (purely coincidentally) also 17 different meanings listed.

Let me, therefore, strike out on my own and define "development" as the set of actions aimed toward a greater realization of human aspirations. In doing so, I purposefully chose a broad definition, which again encompasses a myriad of possibilities. Indeed, if one wishes to include all present uses of this word by all the various groups with different non-material and material sensitivities, a broad meaning like this is needed.

In doing so, however, we again, for the third time, plunged into a vast sea of value judgements and teleologies. Depending on what *you* think is your aim in life, your aspiration and goal, you will understand a different set of actions when you hear the word "development."

The Narrow Meanings

So how did these three apparently extremely broad words become expropriated and by whom?

The first two were pounced on by what is nowadays called the "environmental movement". In their usage, "environment" was forced to mean those entities which that group was primarily concerned about, and the meaning of this word was amputated to exclude those elements the group was not sensitive to. Similarly, "quality of life" was shackled to be constrained to include only those aspects of human existence that environmentalists consider important.

Thus, pollution, technology, energy production, space travel, artificial food preservatives, military balance through armament, the expansion of cities, supersonic air planes, etc., were declared negative contributions to the "quality of life" and negative influences in our "environment". The list, naturally, will vary somewhat with

the particular subspecies of environmentalist one encounters, but on the whole the above examples hold.

But one should not be one sided in "blaming" environmentalists for the prostitution of words. The opponents of the "environmentalists" have been similarly guilty in such a constraining of meanings. To be sure, the specific words "environment" and "quality of life" were not so much used prior to the "environmentalist" movement, but to the extent they were, they became also loaded, though perhaps in the opposite direction. In the 19th century, for example, the clearing of swamps, the cutting down of forests to turn the land into agricultural areas would have undoubtedly been unanimously declared to improve the environment and enhance the quality of life, had these words been in common use then.

In any case, for all practical purposes, today the words "environment", and "quality of life" are dead. They have become facile cliches, at the whim of anybody who uses them, are they automatically appeal to emotions by making people see red or green, depending on value systems. One would hope that the very realization that the words themselves are innocent, and that it is the users who are responsible for their debased conditions might bring about a gradual elevation in their status and an eventual reestablishment of their right to belong to the family of decent and meaningful words.

The third word, "development", lost its original broad meaning in a different way. The culprits here are the economists, and particularly those concerned with the "developing" countries. At their insistence the word has come to mean *only* economic, and perhaps a bit of social, but never cultural, spiritual, philosophical, moral, or general aspirational development. This raises havoc in public discussions concerning the developing countries, since the analyses, on account of the constrained meaning of the word, are automatically restricted to a discourse about material, economic matters. Thus some of the deepest, most difficult, and most important problems of overall development remain untouched.

Let us now form a sentence out of our three words: Attention to the environment in developmental matters will enhance the quality of life. We can see by now that this sentence is loaded with triple set of infinite meanings. It is therefore unfortunate that today the narrow, crippled meaning of this sentence tells us only that if we heed the "environmentalist" movement in arranging the material evolution of the world, the world will change to a state which this same movement will consider an improvement. What originally could have been a meaningful directive has been reduced to a mere tautology.

Materialism?

One of the amusing but at the same time ironic features of debates between opposing sets of values, opposing ideologies, opposing groups of aspirations is that each accuses the other of being materialistic. In the case of the debate on environment and the quality of life, this is very much in evidence. The "environmentalists" loudly claim that they represent a spiritual revival while their opponents are obsessed

only with material considerations such as technological gadgets, money, material wealth, profit, etc. At the same time, people of the opposite persuasion equally indignantly claim that the "environmental movement" is more concerned with rocks than with the happiness of people enjoying recreation in a reservoir created by a dam inundating those rocks. They also claim that the maniac craving for material, bodily safety in transportation or in medicine becomes completely oblivious of the spiritual and other non-material benefits that fast transportation and the ensuing broadening of horizons have brought to people, or of the "obvious" rise in the "quality of life" due to the fastest possible availability of pain-killing or curing drugs. They will also be uncomprehending of people who, instead of driving into the mountains to get spiritual benefits from hiking, spend their spare time with as inane material chores as picking up empty bottles.

One might at first think that both sides in this confrontation cannot be right, and so one wonders what the resolution of the dilemma is. Actually the answer is rather simple. Since aspirations, sensitivities, and perceptions are so dependent on values and individual tastes, a person strongly committed (or, we might say, over-committed) to a set of values will often fail to see the non-material nature of the aspirations and perceptions of others, and hence will comprehend only the obvious, material part of it. That picking up empty bottles can be motivated by non-material force will be difficult to ingest for somebody in whose concept of environment the question of how many bottles are used and how many lie around are largely unimportant. Conversely, to somebody who is completely unmoved by the spiritual desire to travel through space at 60,000 feet at 2,000 miles per hour, with an almost black sky above, and a stunningly remote perspective of land below will consider traveling in the Concorde a purely material act with no further meaning.

Ultimate Criteria

So far it might appear that the choice of values and their consequences are purely a matter of personal taste, and that accordingly the primary meaning of words is determined simply by the most vocal group at a given time. According to such an image, complete relativism reigns, and so history is a simple sequence of random trends in values and aspirations.

The reason why in actuality this is not so is simple. We do live in a physical world, and there are laws of nature which are *not* arbitrary, which do *not* change just because our values change. Perhaps as a result of the laws of nature, there are also laws of individual and societal behavior, and hence of history, and over the centuries and millenia, when conflicting value systems have repeatedly clashed, in the ensuing battle the more "dynamic" systems won out while the others vanished from the scene.

The above statement, of course, is purely tautological unless we can also say something about some common characteristics of "dynamic" systems or civilizations (beside the fact that they were victorious). This is a tall order, which can be filled only to a rudimentary extent. One can nevertheless say that a broad horizon, bold-

ness, self-confidence, a utilization of all available knowledge and know-how, a taking of risks, a conscious application of all accessible capabilities are certainly among the hallmarks of "winning" movements, groups, or civilizations. Conversely, obsession with safety, being riddled with fear of the unknown and fear of changes, an emphasis on limitations instead of on opportunities, a reluctance of "thinking big" and a predilection for nostalgic reminiscences of the "good old days" are often characteristic of those who will soon disappear from the human arena.

It is, of course, extremely difficult to tell, contemporaneously, which groups, views, movements, or civilizations fall into one or the other category. As the famous physicist, Max Born, once said, it is very difficult to predict, especially ahead of time. With hindsight it is not at all hard to discern the features I just outlined, but when embroiled in a confrontation of forces today, a sagacious judgement is not easy.

Yet, when reading the various views and opinions about "environment", "quality of life", and "development", we must attempt to read the future and try to see whether we hear voices of the future or shadows of regression. If such a perspective replaces the uncomprehending name-calling, the emotional accusation, or the completely neutral relativism, we are in a better position to believe that we are making contributions to the "environment", to "quality of life", and to "development" taking all three in the broadest sense possible.