

Editorial

A concern that many public leaders face is how to work for the longer-term well-being of Florida during a time when the public continually appears to be concerned with more immediate results. It is becoming increasingly difficult for political leaders representing a complex society to work toward programs that impact the common good.

Robert Graham

What Robert Graham, Governor of Florida, says above in his July 17, 1980 letter to Dan Reutenberg, who was then chairman of the Board of Directors of the Florida Endowment for the Humanities, is typical of the frustration that many political leaders are experiencing in our society today. On many issues that come before local government councils, state legislatures, and the United States Congress, leaders often are caught between special, short-term interests of individual citizens and private groups and longer-term concerns for the welfare of an entire population. When the questions being addressed concern environmental matters, the problem is even more complicated, because decisions that affect the environment often lead to consequences for future generations that are difficult to foresee.

It is with these concerns in mind that the editorial office of *Zygon*, with the support of Rollins College, decided to conduct a conference on "Private Interests, Public Good, and the Future of the Environment." For this we were granted partial funding from the Florida Endowment for the Humanities. The conference took place on March 19-21, 1981, at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida.

Why did the *Zygon* office become involved in what might be regarded as a matter of politics? While it is true that the stimulus for the conference came from the political sphere of our society, it is also true that the concern raised by Governor Graham cannot be dealt with only in a political manner. Any effective resolution of conflicts between the general welfare and the interests of private citizens or special groups depends to a large degree on a better understanding of human nature in both its biological and cultural aspects. We must seek to discover how we are so constituted that our own short-term individual interests often dominate our concerns, even to the point of motivating groups of citizens to lobby in legislatures and the halls of Congress for special causes; at the same time we must discover how we, the same individuals, can be motivated to balance our private desires with long-term concern for our fellow human beings and for the environment. Such a theoretical understanding as to the causes of and possible solutions to the problem of balancing private interests and general welfare should assist politicians and other decision-makers in more effectively disposing of the questions they are confronted with in their work. Thus, what starts out looking like a political problem actually has underlying questions of who we are as human beings, what our purposes are in living, and what motivates us in our daily lives. These kinds of questions can best be addressed today by combining contemporary knowledge from the sciences with insights from religion, other humanities' disciplines, and other institutions that analyze, support, and promote human values.

The five papers in this issue discuss at least three major themes regarding the relationships between private interests, public good, and the environment. The first is that both biological and social factors help to produce private self-interests as well as the means to control such interests. Ralph Wendell Burhoe, for example, analyzes private interests and public good in terms of the theme he has been developing in many articles—the symbiotic relationship between the biologically based and culturally based information comprising each individual human being. From an evolutionary perspective he further argues that we humans primarily act on the basis of what gives each of us pleasure and that this is not something learned but is genetically programmed into our central nervous system. Paul D. MacLean, through his research on the evolution of the brain from lower animals to humans, also suggests that the second of the three human brains to emerge historically in evolution, the old mammalian brain or limbic system, is the seat of certain specific emotions such as aggression and sexual arousal. These primarily serve the interests of the individual. However, he goes on to note that a third emotion also present in the limbic system is not so individualistically oriented; it is the parental instinct, which distinguishes mammals from reptiles. This, he argues, provides the biological basis for the family and can be extended culturally to include others of the same species. Thus the parental instinct provides a basis for ethics. Between reading Burhoe and MacLean, then, one can recognize biological influences on both egoism and reciprocal altruism.

One discovers the same when one reads the essays that focus more on the cultural sources of private interests and public good. Victor Ferkiss cites liberalism, an outlook that emerged during the Enlightenment, as having stressed generally individual interests; however, liberalism is no longer viable in its original form but must be modified so that the values of community and group welfare become paramount. Garrett Hardin focuses on cultural developments that tend to support altruism, but he questions how far altruism can be extended if one takes certain insights of evolutionary theory into account. He argues that one can perhaps extend altruism from the family up to the nation-state but that a universal form of altruism for the entire planet will be detrimental in the long run to the welfare of the human species.

A second theme that emerges is how the emotions and reason relate to individual interests and public good. Burhoe in focusing on pleasure and MacLean in dealing with the intrinsic properties of the limbic system stress the emotional side of the human species, but they also recognize the importance of the neocortex or new mammalian brain, which is the locus of the development of language and rational thought. While emotions are important and cannot be ignored, because they are a part of our biological nature, reason is also a part of our nature: we can and should use our neocortical capabilities to govern our old-mammalian emotions and our reptilian-brain habits. However, as Ferkiss suggests when he discusses the symbolization of needs by advertisers and politicians and how such symbolization converts biological needs into culturally motivated, insatiable human wants, the neocortex does not only support careful, rational reflection. The neocortical capacity for language also allows us to symbolically represent the desires of the limbic system, but these symbolized and thereby heightened desires may not always be good for us as either individuals or societies in the long run. Ferkiss, therefore, urges us to change the symbolizations of needs—and the values the symbolizations represent—in order to support an emphasis on the longer-term, common good of humankind.

Bruce B. Wavell also focuses on human reason but argues for a different kind of change. He proposes that we should change the political decision-making process from one that represents the will of the people, which is apt to be heavily influenced by emotions and private interests, to one that represents reasons for or against a piece of legislation. We should follow the judicial model of having advocates represent the various reasons for alternative positions. These reasons are then judged by a jury of peers who have the responsibility for deciding whether something is the case and what should be done. Thus, while Ferkiss focuses more on changing the emotive side of human beings, Wavell argues that one should be more rational in decision making, not ignoring the emotional side but giving emotions their due weight as well as giving due weight to the common good and the environment.

The final theme emerging in this issue concerns the relationship between human beings and the environment. Most writers seem to emphasize how we human beings are acting on the environment. They recognize that the environment is necessary for supporting human life and are concerned that the contemporary generation may radically alter the environment so as to make life for future generations more difficult. However, as Burhoe emphasizes, from an evolutionary perspective one must also acknowledge the environment's acting on us. The environment is a larger reality system that has shaped our own biological tendencies and to some extent even our cultures. To be sure, we act on the environment; but our actions, whether they be more determined by our genetic or our cultural information, are in the long run judged by the very environment upon which we act. As Charles Darwin wrote in his *Origin of Species*: "It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life." When one takes natural selection into account, then human beings must face the requirement of being more consciously involved in the constant interaction not only between individuals and the larger culture but also between humans and the rest of the world. Our actions, both individual and cooperative, must fit harmoniously with the rest of the actions of nature in a dynamic, evolving system. As Burhoe puts it, "When the addition of new sociocultural information, which raises us above animals, is harmonious with the genetic and ecosystemic information, human life tends toward the divine."

The papers in this issue all address the theme of private interests, public good, and the environment. However I would be remiss not to recognize that they actually come out of two conferences. The first four were presented at the Rollins conference on "Private Interests, Public Good, and the Future of the Environment." Garrett Hardin's paper, along with an earlier version of Paul MacLean's essay, also was presented at a symposium on January 4, 1981 sponsored by the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Toronto, Canada. This symposium was titled "Humanity's Place in the Universe," and was held in honor of Ralph Wendell Burhoe's seventieth year and in honor of his receiving the Templeton Prize for progress in religion. In its next issue *Zygon* will publish one other paper from this symposium, W. Widick Schroeder's "Evolution, Human Values and Religious Experience: A Process Perspective." These papers together, and each in its own way,

support a general theme of *Zygon*: as individualistic as we human beings are, each quite unique in the overall scheme of things, we cannot live solely unto ourselves. We find our meaning and purpose in living when we consider the long history of life and culture out of which each of us has emerged, when each of us recognizes that we are human only as we cooperate with others not just toward our own ends but also toward the good of the larger society, and when we as societies live in such a way that we are in harmony with the rest of nature.

K. E. P.

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