

M I S C E L L A N E O U S

L'INSTITUT DE LA VIE

In October 1971, Professor Maurice Marois, of the Paris Faculty of Medicine, delivered to the meeting of the League of Red Cross Societies' Board of Governors in Mexico a paper concerning the Institut de la Vie of which he is the President. We take pleasure in reproducing extracts which concern, in particular, the environment.

We would first mention that Professor Marois paid tribute to the Red Cross, thanks to which " it has been proved that all the nations of the world can be united in respect for a gift common to all men and transcending their differences, namely the gift of life ". Yet life is not something which has been improvised. It has a policy, which is to persevere, to express itself, to overcome, to evolve; but it is beset by dangers.

I do not wish to dwell only on the atomic threat. There are other dangers to man, the foremost of which is the degeneration of his environment.

The earth is afflicted by the animal, mineral and vegetable kingdoms' subjection to man's will. Formerly, geological upheaval caused the extinction of species, whereas today man himself can cause cataclysms on an equivalent scale. He strips the surface of the earth of the forest and leaves it desolate. He destroys biotopes evolved over thousands of years and in which species had adapted to conditions which man confounds. He causes the extinction of animal—and even certain human—species. He is already jeopardizing the life of future generations of his own kind by the genetic damage which he inflicts on the chromosomes of his germinal cells.

The final tragedy: The shortage of material and of space.

The contrast between the super-abundance of potentials and the shortage of means is striking. A single bacterium, reproducing in geometrical progression by the process of fission could, within a week, under ideal conditions, synthesize a mass of living matter

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exceeding that of the earth. Yet, no bacterium does produce such a mass within a week. It must submit to some sort of birth control, adapt to shortage and succumb to its own limitations.

Shortage: the earth is becoming too small to hold us all; raw materials are becoming inadequate for building up and maintaining our protoplasm. What a paradox! Life is becoming a threat to life.

Shortage: nothing is wasted in life: every atom and every molecule in our bodies has formed part of countless millions of living beings before us, and our mortal remains will go to the building of other bodies; this is the well-known carbon-oxygen-nitrogen-phosphorus, etc. cycle. Seen from this angle, death has a place in the economy of life; it serves life by giving it new opportunities for new experiments, for new mutations of protoplasms.

The continuous exchange between inanimate and living matter is a two-way process. Death constantly balances life and we know that every beat of our heart takes us nearer to death. Life, according to Goethe, is "duration in change" and, according to Heraclitus, "the river, ever changing in its waves but eternal in its flow". Life begins anew with each birth. New is the life of every being born, and new is its vital impulse. And with every newborn, the world reawakes.

This life, with its fantastic history, obstinately persevering, is destined to a great future.

The world may be inhabitable for another six thousand million years.

A great future for life, no doubt, but with or without man?

Man knows he is mortal and of a death which may be self-inflicted. He has discovered that his ecological environment is delicately balanced and vulnerable and that he can cause it irreparable harm. He knows that there are limits to his propagation, for the day will come when the earth will be saturated with human beings. He is gradually developing an awareness of belonging to a single community, subject to the same destiny and dangers.

Man again finds himself prey to the terror which, in the early stages of his development, was caused by the uncontrollable forces unleashed by nature, but which now is caused by the forces which he himself has released and by the increasing pace of his own history. But that feeling is immediately tempered by the knowledge

that he himself controls the forces unleashed, that he is the free subject of the history he controls and no longer a powerless and passive being subjected to evolution. After the elation of the apparently all-powerful demiurge, comes the anxiety of the enlightened morrow, when the question of how to use the power of science for man's fulfilment arises. Man is faced with an alternative: whether to exploit resources to the point of exhaustion, and species to that of extinction—the ultimate confrontation between the mineral kingdom and the animate world's supreme representative, man— or whether to co-operate consciously and rationally in the biological cycle—promethean man's reconciliation with mother nature, his integration in a cosmic order in which life is a higher form of organization and freedom, life's supreme acquisition. In the turmoil of contemporary history, a latent new renaissance is discernible; the humanism of a new era drawing its light from two sources: recognition of the value of life and the affirmation of the greatness of free and responsible mankind.

Necessity demands that we evolve a new habitat for the world of tomorrow, that we go further and faster than history, in order that proven permanent and universal values may survive the demise of the obsolete world which produced them. What is needed is an appropriate organization, incorporating all the wealth and wisdom of the past, analysing all future potentialities and comparing them with the permanent aspirations and demands of humanity, of "united, temporal and intemporal" man (Saint-John Perse).

On 8 September 1960, we invited men of science to unite with men of the highest level of conscience in order to establish an institution of symbolic value, *l'Institut de la Vie*. Men must be aware that somewhere in the world there is a shrine where humanity meditates on itself, its present, its future and its responsibility to life.

The institute is developing rapidly on all continents, sustained by men's hopes and the momentum of history.

L'Institut de la Vie gathers together, in a constructive undertaking, men of all classes, philosophies and pursuits. It is wide open to all schools of creative thought and civilization. It banishes everything which divides and seeks out everything which unites. All men whom it brings together renounce whatever segregates them in order to find common ground for the defence and promotion of life.

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L'Institut de la Vie is a forum for the expression of ideas. One of its activities is to meditate on the fundamentals of life: such reflection should underlie any effort to safeguard life.

The Institute's national and international conferences have discussed such vital themes as science and responsibility, life past and future, the protection of species, mental health and urban civilization, the human habitat, the protection of nature, theoretical physics and biology (the international organizing committee has thirty-six scientists, fifteen of them Nobel Prize winners), man and the computer (this conference was held at Bordeaux in June 1970 and was attended by thirty nations).

When the *Intitut de la Vie* was founded ten years ago, our contemporaries were not concerned about life. What is new is the coupling of public concern with political intent. The protection of life has become a governmental and intergovernmental problem because of the threat hovering over nature. Environment is life; it is basic. It must be taken seriously because it is not only physical, chemical and biological; it is also psychological, social, cultural and spiritual. In the last analysis, a human philosophy and a concept of life are involved in any decision intended to protect man's habitat.

The *Institut de la Vie* sees the problem of the environment in terms of the human condition. It places responsibility to life at the supreme level of human freedom.

In conclusion, Mr. Marois referred to the Prix de l'Institut de la Vie which was awarded for the first time in 1971. "We are called", he said, "to fight for life, to undertake a new form of fight. It is that fight which the Institut de la Vie wages, by applying science in the service of life and mankind."
