

#### F 4. TO & FROM SOCIETY

If you want to be happier, take seriously and act upon the following:

Almost all that we are we owe to others--first life itself, then rearing, then all that is poured into our minds by others or made available by them from childhood on. The individual is not an independent entity, maturing autonomously, living independently of others, or exploiting them. Life is life with others. To be sure there is individualization in the process, and that entails potential conflict, but fulfillment requires harmonization. Feral man is not human; the human is a social product. We have some freedom in a social context, but what we do to and with others is what makes us, along with how we react to what others do to & with us.

The individual and the social (i.e. others, or the group) are both primary. That creativity comes from the individual is correct, but it is easily forgotten that the individual contribution is marginal in the social and historical context.

Almost everything that we have we owe to others--first life, then vastly more than we could have produced without being part of a complex economy. Much more comes from standing on the shoulders of earlier generations and benefitting from what they transmitted to this generation. We can at best contribute only a little, except to a few people, while we take much. Our impact can indeed be either positive or negative to those in direct or indirect, close or distant, contact with us.

Since much of what we are and what we have has come from or depended upon others, our predecessors and our contemporaries, and our contemporaries and our successors depend upon what we give them, our obligation is great to do at least as well for them as was done for us. Since we have grounds also to criticize some of what was done for us & to us, we have an obligation to do better for & to others. These things ground our positive obligation to be concerned for & to contribute to others' welfare. The social problem is not primarily that people are generally amoral and don't care about others, having no social concern and feeling no moral obligation. Nor are most people immoral in enjoying harming others. The problem is that the scope of people's moral concern and sense of obligation tends to be too narrow. They do things & support policies that help a few people they care about, or help large ethnic, national, religious or other ideological group with which they identify; but they ignore, fail to recognize, or don't care that others are thereby hurt. Their social concern is not broad enough. Obligation is felt only to an in-group. It is easy to protest that one does not know how to help those of other groups, and that may be true, but the test is whether one feels any obligation to try to find out how to do so. It is also easy and correct to say that one's obligation is greater to some, including closer personal

relations and one's in-groups than to out-groups. But though charity begins at home, the obligation should not end there.

Those of us who were smart enough to have gotten ourselves born in countries where the standard of living is relatively high have inherited more freedoms for our individualism than have those born elsewhere. Accordingly we have greater obligations to contribute to less fortunate contemporaries and to the next generation. Humorist Art Buchwald, speaking at a college graduation ceremony, told the graduates that his generation had made a perfect world for them and he didn't want them to go out there and start messing it up. When we are serious we know that what the modern Western world is offering to its contemporaries and what it may pass on to its successors is a very mixed bag. It is to be hoped that both contemporaries and successors will be discriminating enough to take our best and not our worst, though we are currently making more money trying to pass on some things that are far from our best.

Some of our best that we can hope spreads and survives is not our imperfect practice of watered down or distorted ideals, but our highest ideals themselves. They include our best conceptions of freedom and individualism. They include the ideal of a society in which everyone has fair and ample freedom and opportunity to develop their finest individual potentialities, all have freedom to develop and harmonize their individual creativities, and none are treated unjustly.