

THE THEE GENERATION

Tom Regan

I write of a new generation, The Thee Generation. It is a generation of service: of giving not taking, of commitment to principles not material possessions, of communal compassion not conspicuous consumption. If the defining question of the present generation is "What can I get for me?," the central question of this new generation is "What can I do for thee?"

The "thee" to be served includes the handicapped and the poor, the illiterate and the homeless, the starving and the abused, those newly born and those soon to die. Race makes no difference. Sex makes no difference. Religion and nationality, these, too, make no difference. All who stand in need are served, with those least able to help themselves receiving the greater share. In The Thee Generation, absolute vulnerability finds absolute protection.

This ethic of service-to-the-other is rooted in a reconceptualization of what the human person is. A shared sense of community replaces the void of individual estrangement. Only by acting for the other does one come to know one's self, not in isolation from the ties that bind each to all, but in affirmation of them. Apart from such relationships the self is seen to be an empty shell, the word "I" the most impersonal of pronouns. The malign logic of Descartes's *cogito* is dead. In its place a new declaration is alive: *Ego vivo in civitate, ergo sum* ("I live in community, therefore I am").

This sense of community dissolves the arrogant boundaries of humanism. Possessed of the breath of life, members of The Thee Generation recognize their membership in the life community. Each thing remains what it is, and not another thing. But *what* each is, is now seen to be connected to all that is. Whereas previous generations saw a world consisting of discrete, isolated atoms of matter (or of mind), The Thee Generation sees interrelated, molecular communities of life.

This change in perspective is more than conceptual. The realization of human embeddedness in nature is a half-truth if limited to some abstract, objective formula, as if all biotic connections could be reduced to the chemical kinship found in the carbon cycle. Human embeddedness is subjectively concrete, affording an immediate, living sense of what it is to be in the world. The landscape remains unaltered, but the perspective is changed. Fundamentally. Radically.

Along with an increased awareness of living-in-community with all life, members of The Thee Generation assume increased responsibility for life. In contrast to previous generations, who saw the alienated human as master, members of The Thee Generation see themselves as servant of the

natural world. The question "What can I do for thee?" is asked not only of vulnerable, disempowered humans but also of nature's nonhuman citizens.

Of the "higher" animals, certainly. The depraved instrumentality by which previous generations have fixed the value of these animals is replaced by the recognition of their inherent worth. That worth is neither respected nor served by allowing commerce in their flesh as food, for example, or by utilizing them as "models" of human disease. An ethic of domination, one that elevates the human to the status of master species, both accepts and encourages these and many other forms of socially sanctioned barbarity. But not an ethic of service. Such an ethic shakes the very foundations of Western civilization as we know it. In place of the pathological tradition of animal enslavement, The Thee Generation offers a philosophy of liberation, one that calls for freeing these animals from the yoke of human tyranny.

This same philosophy extends to the sustainers of life: the land, the waters, the air. These, too, are protected—these, too, liberated—from the ravages of individual and collective greed. The human walks gently upon the earth, and what once was plundered is now restored.

Familiar problems remain. Members of The Thee Generation are not naked noble savages; they do not abandon human civilization in favor of the traditions of ancestral nomads. Within the network of the evolving human life-way, sources of energy must be found, food and building materials secured, means of transportation developed, the needs of the elderly attended, the young educated. Today's moral, social and political questions endure.

But not today's answers. And not today's accepted basis for finding them. In place of the false standards of human material prosperity and personal salvation, The Thee Generation calls for community integrity and individual service. In The Thee Generation the rights of one person end not only where those of another human's begin but also where the interests of the life community are threatened. The limits of individual liberty are reassessed. If educational practices encourage and reward acceptance of human isolation and domination, they are changed. When the few seek economic power at the cost of massive destruction to the life community, they are stopped. Since pornographic materials subordinate women as a group, they are prohibited.

Because the Thee Generation is still emerging, it today has little by way of settled philosophy. Indeed, perhaps more than anything else, the *philosophical foundations* of this emerging worldview—a worldview that tolerates even as it is not hindered by the latest "postmodern" intellectual fad—it is these very foundations that must receive the most intense exploration. What is the ontology of being in which the embedded self finds it-

self? What is the epistemology that cannot know the self apart from others? What is the articulated ethic that calls for service to the society of life without denying the worth of the individual?

These are the questions, not the franchised menu of ideas currently dominating the profession, that define philosophy's real promise in the decades ahead and its debt to the centuries behind. In the best sense, then, philosophy's mission remains the same, as do those of the several sciences, art, religion and other human creative endeavors. Again, only the perspective has changed.

That perspective already is changing, and the work of philosophers already is helping change it. Each of the insistent voices has its own vocabulary, each its particular agenda. Feminism. Deep ecology. Animal rights. The differences are many, but the aspirations are the same: To rediscover who we are, and what we can (and ought to) be. A revolution is underway—a revolution of the human spirit. All around us the weight of dead theories and decaying institutions is being cast off.

I have written of The Thee Generation as new. Yet in some ways it is ancient. Like Augustine's City of God, which has no particular location, the Thee Generation has no specific temporal place. Some members have lived and died. Others live now. Many more are yet to be born. All are united across time by the bonds of shared ideals, communal aspirations, and an unshakeable conviction: The day *will* come when their numbers and influence will be sufficient to cause cultural change, to save not only the whales and the planet but ourselves. Faith demands this. And optimism? Optimism finds cause to celebrate the early signs of restlessness among today's youth, only now beginning to rouse themselves from their parents' dogmatic slumbers: the *next* generation!

One thing is certain. Whatever hope there is for the flourishing of life, within and beyond the human family, requires the demise of those ideas that have brought us here. The ethos of avenging angels is past. Ours is an age when benevolent assassins are asked to bury false ideologies. If philosophers have a future, it is this.