Roy Ridgway

# Shaw and the Life Force

**Bernard Shaw lived at a time when you had to shout to be heard. He was in turn waggish, outrageous and self-assertive, but the real Shaw was, as his friends testified, shy and sensitive. He was, in a sense, a deeply religious man. Running through much of what he said was a belief in an ultimate power in the universe, which he called the Life Force. The Life Force was what made things go round as well as go-wrong.**

Shaw lived to a great age, was a teetotaller, non-smoker, and vegetarian, and believed that soap and water, drains and money were the best weapons to fight disease. He remained active, healthy and mentally alert to the end. He enjoyed controversy, and this, said Bertrand Russell, speaking as an old man who was himself a stormy petrel, was the reason why he lived so long. Shaw was not exactly a robust man. He denied himself most of the physical pleasures. Sex played little part in his life. His association with women-Ellen Terry and Mrs Patrick Campbell - was on an intellectual level. One might almost say he committed intellectual adultery. His poor wife was left out in the cold. He confessed after reading Charlotte Shaw's correspondence with T.E. Lawrence that he had known very little about what went on in his wife's mind. A tragedy indeed, because it was a woman's mind, and not her body, that appealed to him most. As someone said recently, he lived a full life from the neck upwards.

Shaw's approach to health was that of the intellectual aesthete. He believed that health was, in fact, mainly a matter of aesthetics. Where there is ugliness of one kind or another, which is practically everywhere - Shaw seemed to be saying all the time - there is disease. Epidemiologists now could agree that there is much that is true in what he said. To take two extreme examples of the effect of an ugly environment on health - Burkitt's lymphoma occurs in hot, wet climates where the tsetse fly and mosquito flourish, suggesting stagmant water and a lack of hygiene; and cancer of the mouth occurs in impoverished parts of India - unaesthetic conditions, as Shaw would say - where people chew the betel (containing carcinogenic substances) to allay the pangs of hunger. Remove the ugliness, says Shaw, and you remove the disease.

It has been suggested that lung cancer and heart disease are part of an intricate evolutionary process whereby at a time when populations are increasing too rapidly for comfort Nature provides the means - an insatiable craving for tobacco - to check the increase. This, I feel sure, is a theory that would have appealed to Shaw, only for Nature he would have substituted 'the Life Force'.

The Life Force was, as he described it, the generative power in the universe, an immaterial entity in life which, in Wordsworthian language, 'moves through all things,' and paradoxically can be both a strengthening and a weakening factor in matters of health - the Life Force can become the Death Force.

Where people propagate like rabbits, through ignorance or selfishness, Shaw

might have said, there would inevitably be disease, because the Life Force 'is keenly sensitive to aesthetic conditions, and revenges dirt and ugliness pitilessly.' If people realized this, he maintained, they would find out how to prevent cancer in a human being 'instead of spending huge sums on finding out how to produce it in a mouse.'

Scientists paid little attention to his theories, which didn't bother him in the least, because he was 'anti-scientism' - the laboratory door, he said, is shut against 'metaphysics, including consciousness, purpose, mind, evolution, creation, choice (free will), and anything else that is staring us in the face all over the real world'. There are, however, many today who would not quarrel with his statement that disease is not a fixed entity but a function of individual parasite and individual host: each case is a unique condition. And there are few who would disagree with what Shaw described as the necessities of health: clean living - plenty of fresh air, sunshine and soap and water - wholesome food (in his case, vegetarian) and the avoidance of alcohol and tobacco. If we all lived as Shaw advised, there might be little need for doctors; but unfortunately in the world today economic and social pressures make it difficult for most of us - poor mortals - to live Shaw's kind of life. The need to make money is the main problem. As one of Shaw's heroes, Samuel Butler, said, 'No gold, no Holy Ghost'. No gold, no Life Force!

In Shaw's play, 'On the Rocks,' a character called 'The Lady's appears before the British Prime Minister, announcing that she is 'a ghost from the future.' She explains that she runs a sanatorium in the Welsh mountains where her patients work to cure themselves by thought alone. Her pathology is Shavian: 'All sorts of bodily diseases are produced by half-used minds; for it is the mind that makes the body: that is my secret and the secret of all true healers.'

Today Shaw would probably be described as a psychosomatic evolutionist, but we have moved away from the post-Freudian emphasis on the mind - or the unconscious as a controlling factor towards an acceptance of what may be described as the triple-aspect theory of health. Those who practise psychosomatic medicine would, I think, agree that mind, body and environment are closely interrelated, in a very complex way, and are all involved in the onset of illness. Diagnosis is, as Erikson says, a problem of relativities - a systematic going around in circles, in which you can gradually clarify the relevances and relativities of all the known data.'

Shaw, however, came very close to Erikson's view of illness when he said that problems of preventive care, diagnosis and treatment would not come from tinkering with the parts (of the organism), but from working with the Force that made those parts go round - as well as go wrong.

As a Socialist Shaw maintained that the illness of poverty and wealth - 'pining famine and full-fed disease,' as his favourite poet, Shelley, put it - could be cured by an equal distribution of the national income. The idea - or rather the idea that a lack of money is a cause of disease - is crystallized in the words of Dubedat, the young artistic genius in *The Doctor's Dilemma,* when he says, 'What's the matter in this house isn't lungs but bills.'

In 'Shaw and the Doctors' (Basic Books, New York, 1969) Roger Boxill writes, 'It is a major argument of Shaw's that if

everyone received an adequate living and had to work for it (that is, if socialism were a reality), both the illnesses due to poverty and the illnesses due to wealth would be prevented. Again and again Shaw makes the point that people become unhealthy not only from inadequate nourishment, but also from 'a hard London season'; not only from inadequate heating but also from too much of it.'

These ideas are generally accepted today. At least, they don't seem so eccentric. We are constantly being reminded that too much rich food, the stresses that come from overwork, and the depression from having too little to do, are hazards to health. There were two tragic examples of the 'over-heating' theory during the war. In the concentration camps those who kept closest to the stoves died first; and in the siege of Leningrad, those who went out into the blizzard and spent their time reading in the libraries, were better equipped to stand up to the rigours of a severe winter without much food than those who took to their beds to keep themselves warm.

Many of the battles that Shaw was fighting have now been won. We have got the better clothes, better food and better living conditions - at least we have in the Western world - that Shaw said were needed more than medicine. But more people fill the doctor's waiting-room than ever before. Free medicine has unearthed illnesses that the doctor never saw in the old days, and what it seems the doctor is treating more than anything else nowadays is unhappiness. People are still digging their graves with their teeth - more of them than in Shaw's day; smoking themselves to death knowing that in this country we have the highest rate of lung cancer in the world; driving themselves round the bend to earn more money to buy cars, refrigerators, washing machines, central heating and T.V. sets.

What would Shaw make of it all today? Would he give up in despair, or would he perhaps turn his attention to the under-privileged nations - to India, for example, where only some 500,000 people in a population of five hundred million live tolerate lives? For most of us India is a long way off. We have our own problems. As the Arabs say, 'My toothache is worse than a thousand dead in Jerusalem.' In this country we live longer, have conquered most of the infectious diseases, but the Welfare State which Shaw helped to create has bred a whole crop of new illnesses that are proving just as intractable as anything we suffered from in the past. So what perhaps is needed is a good dose of Shavian aesthetics.