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Section XIX: An Analysis of the Contemporary World's Search for Meaning

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4. The Enlightenment Again Under Attack

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4. The Enlightenment Again Under Attack

Abstract
Until recently, and especially in the United States, Western Civilization has been dominated by Enlightenment thought, tempered by the criticisms of the nineteenth century. One of the current questions is whether this strand of thought is adequate to cope with the problems of the age of anxiety. Those who believe that the Enlightenment ideas are still basically sound suggest the giving up of transcendent or long-term goals in favor of more immediate aims. Equality and freedom are, in such a context better when they apply to more people than when they apply to fewer. According to this way of thinking, one interpretation of justice would be better than another if it could be realized by more people. That type of security is better which more people can enjoy. Thus the Enlightenment concepts are dealt with less qualitatively than quantitatively. [*excerpt*]

Keywords
Contemporary Civilization, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution

Disciplines
History | Intellectual History | Political History | Social History

Comments
This is a part of Section XIX: An Analysis of the Contemporary World's Search for Meaning. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man,* as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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4. The Enlightenment Again Under Attack

Until recently, and especially in the United States, Western Civilization has been dominated by Enlightenment thought, tempered by the criticisms of the nineteenth century. One of the current questions is whether this strand of thought is adequate to cope with the problems of the age of anxiety. Those who believe that the Enlightenment ideas are still basically sound suggest the giving up of transcendent or long-term goals in favor of more immediate aims. Equality and freedom are, in such a context, better when they apply to more people than when they apply to fewer. According to this way of thinking, one interpretation of justice would be better than another if it could be realized by more people. That type of security is better which more people can enjoy. Thus the Enlightenment concepts are dealt with less qualitatively than quantitatively.

This approach has certain obvious merits. It does avoid the appeal to any absolute, either political or religious. It is also in line with the Enlightenment demand for an empirical approach to all problems. And, it includes our traditional emphasis on the supremacy of the individual, with his right to pass judgment on all ideals and values before giving them his allegiance. And finally it offers an interpretation which is potentially universal in its applicability. It can be used to include all men on the face of the earth, or even on planets yet to be visited. But, despite these advantages, this approach has certain serious shortcomings when applied to the twentieth century.

One of the first questions to be raised concerning the adequacy of the Enlightenment-liberal tradition today focuses on the difference between contemporary society and that of the eighteenth century. In the earlier period men were breaking out of a society dominated by absolutism and establishing their freedom from its restrictions. But the Industrial Revolution created a situation for which the Enlightenment picture was no longer true. For some people, such as the Marxists, changing economic conditions meant that man has also lost his political independence. But for others

the Enlightenment insistence on man's political and moral independence still stood as a bulwark against this interpretation. However, the defense of laissez-faire became increasingly hard. Man's economic choices, to say nothing about his political and moral choices, are just not as free as they once were.

A second question that is raised concerning the adequacy of the Enlightenment focuses on the earlier period's choice of values. Critical though it was of all absolutes, the Enlightenment emphasized such values as liberty and equality. However, as some thinkers have pointed out, these two values are not unrelated to the third value of fraternity. Liberty without fraternity becomes license; and equality without fraternity leads to irresponsibility. While no liberal would wish to return to an interpretation which makes freedom and equality depend on fraternity (something which would make the individual a mere function of the polis, class, nation, or race), he is nevertheless faced with his greater interdependence on others today. He is forced to recognize the claims of the social as well as the individual values. And his choice is not so much between the individual and the social values as it is between the kinds of social values which he must choose.

These claims are today of such importance for some people that they are demanding a realignment of our whole value structure. They ask how we can judge productive efficiency in terms of freedom or equality, and evince a sincere desire to have some positive standard by means of which the individual can pass a realistic judgment on the huge institutions of his time. Such a demand can only be countered by referring to the "people" and by saying that this is not what the people really want. However, if this is what some people sincerely want, there might come a time when a majority would wish this, and then we might be faced with a situation in which a majority democratically called for undemocratic values to be established. Or, we might have a situation in which a majority freely voted to deprive themselves of freedom. The most recent example of this is to be found in Hitler's continuance in power upon the votes of the German people. The very possibility of such a situation anywhere in Western Civilization raises serious questions about the purely quantitative approach to values.

A third question raised about the quantitative approach concerns its adequacy when making distinctions among values, especially in such a complex society as ours is today. Both the Enlightenment and liberalism shared a common enmity to absolutism in all its forms, and, as a consequence, a common program: the promotion of freedom. As long as this was a major objective, it was possible to think mainly in terms of the extent of a single value. Liberalism meant more freedom for more people in an increasing number of areas of life: religion, politics, economics, and culture in general. But today, when the critical work has largely been done, and the construction of a new type of society is well under way, man is faced with a choice. Is liberty more important than security? Is politics more important than economics? Is efficiency more important than

individuality? Is ethics more important than economics, or than politics? To answer these questions, a purely numerical approach breaks down. How can we settle these questions in terms of the number of people who would be free and the number who would be secure? Some other type of standard is demanded, one which will enable us to put our several values in order of priority and then decide among them.

A fourth question follows hard upon the heels of this last one. It is no new question, but rather one which has been raised ever since the Enlightenment by such men as Burke and Kant. Is it possible to arrive at an ideal and the sense of obligation which goes with it, by means solely of an empirical and descriptive approach? The Enlightenment insisted that the only way men could know that anything was desirable was from the fact that they did desire it. Any other approach seemed to them to be nothing more than a return to some form of absolutism. Kant's criticism that it was impossible to arrive at an ought by piling up any number of ises went to the heart of this question. His shifting of the basis of attack from the problem of knowing to that of acting opened up the new lines which we have been following. But the chain of events which followed Kant, represented by men such as Hegel and Bismarck, only served to substantiate the Enlightenment belief that any way other than its own represented a return to absolutism. More recently, however, students of history and politics have raised the question whether the matter is as uncomplicated as a simple choice between freedom and authority. They have pointed out, as did Burke, that the French Revolution, which followed the ideas of the Enlightenment, became just as authoritarian as any other political movement. These more recent analyses have suggested that man has always had some ought or standard of obligation above his empirical existence, that the Enlightenment picture of man as completely free to choose among various ideals was unrealistic, and the question, at least now, is not whether or not to have any ideals, but rather which ideals to choose.

This need for some definite standard and reference point can be seen in a number of areas of human existence today, one of the most significant being language, thought, and grammar. If, for example, we wish to make a comparative statement, the rules of grammar force us to employ a reference to something which is itself not relative. If we wish to say that something is more (bigger, faster), we are required to say more than something else. Our English teachers insist that when we compare we must compare one thing with something else. So we say: He is taller than she, or he is taller than he was a year ago. We find the same problem when we try to graph the path of a planet. Axes must be set up to give us the frame of reference within which we can draw a line which will have meaning. Even when we set up a scientific experiment we must have a point of reference as our control. This helps explain why some thinkers are trying to construct a language of words or mathematical symbols in which such static references will no longer be necessary. But, for the present time at least, we seem to be faced with the need for some standard in order to under-

stand our experiences, whether they be scientific or social, and to express the results of those experiences meaningfully in terms acceptable to the demands of thought and grammar.

There is one final problem which has appeared recently among psychologists and anthropologists. The psychologists have for some time agreed that a person enjoys a much healthier personality if he tries to follow a consistent value system which includes a definite priority. Anthropologists have discovered that the same thing holds true for whole cultures, even though cultures may differ radically among themselves. And this means that the more closely knit our culture becomes, the better it will be if it has a value-system; and further, that the happier we will be if we can find it. But, if values have no reality, or refer to no reality, then serious problems are raised. The moral problem has been raised by those sociologists who ask how an anthropologist can disbelieve in the reality of values, while at the same time either recognizing the need for them if a culture is to be intelligible or recommending them to a culture for its improvement. A metaphysical problem appears when we ask how it is that such nonreal values can work so well, or why a culture's refusal to accept them brings disastrous results.

The demand that we make our cultural values absolute in order to defend them against the powers of totalitarian countries runs against the very grain of our Enlightenment heritage. The demand that we conform appears as nothing as much as the very denial of past history. Faced with the events of World War I, the political defeats of democracy, and the worldwide depression, the liberals' faith was deeply shaken. Under the impact of these events many of them turned to a socialistic interpretation of liberalism by means of which they hoped to harness and control the economic forces. For many, especially during the depression years of the thirties, Russia became the great example of this sort of socialism. But the Nonagression Pact of 1939 between Russia and Nazi Germany brought such an interpretation of Communism to an end, as the purges of 1936-1937 had brought to an end the interpretation of Communism as a democratic movement. The Spanish Revolution of 1936-1939 appeared to many to be simply another Enlightenment situation in which free men were rising up against old feudal absolutisms. But the liberals who joined the Republican forces soon found themselves the supporters of Communism against the fascist-backed forces of Spanish conservatism. Finally, the outbreak of World War II in 1939 seemed to force once again the conclusion that the contemporary world represented nothing as much as a naked struggle for power between the great nation-states. The question was now how to arm oneself against such institutions.