



1958

5. The Search for Meaning

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "5. The Search for Meaning. Pt. XIX: An Analysis of the Contemporary World's Search for Meaning." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 18-31.

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5. The Search for Meaning

Abstract

It is possible to draw certain parallels between the West's present predicament and similar periods of radical change and the dislocation of values, and so to suggest that this sort of thing has happened before, that man has always come out of such situations and landed on his feet, that history is basically cyclical, and that there is no need to be unduly alarmed about our contemporary situation. While it is possible to make a very convincing case for this argument, there are three major factors which are new today. Thanks to our past territorial expansion and new techniques of communication, there is no area of the Western World whose ideas and institutions have been unchanged. Today's changes are immediately carried to all parts of the world. Thus there are no longer any isolated areas to which people can go to escape change and its consequences. Also, thanks to the same means no classes in society are immune from these changes. Whereas in earlier centuries such changes affected only minority groups and limited areas, now they affect all groups and all areas. And further, as we have already noted, this combination of factors, plus the size of our institutions and their competition with one another, have served to increase the rate of change. These three new factors have helped to make our contemporary crisis both more widespread and penetrating than the others which Western Civilization has experienced. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Radical Change, Dislocation of Values, Cyclical History

Disciplines

History | Intellectual 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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5. The Search for Meaning

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present predicament and similar periods of radical change and the dislocation of values, and so to suggest that this sort of thing has happened before, that man has always come out of such situations and landed on his feet, that history is basically cyclical, and that there is no need to be unduly alarmed about our contemporary situation. While it is possible to make a very convincing case for this argument, there are three major factors which are new today. Thanks to our past territorial expansion and new techniques of communication, there is no area of the Western World whose ideas and institutions have been unchanged. Today's changes are immediately carried to all parts of the world. Thus there are no longer any isolated areas to which people can go to escape change and its consequences. Also, thanks to the same means no classes in society are immune from these changes. Whereas in earlier centuries such changes affected only minority groups and limited areas, now they affect all groups and all areas. And further, as we have already noted, this combination of factors, plus the size of our institutions and their competition with one another, have served to increase the rate of change. These three new factors have helped to make our contemporary crisis both more widespread and penetrating than the others which Western Civilization has experienced.

There have been various attempts to do something about the present predicament by locating a scapegoat and suggesting a panacea. Fascism, Naziism, and Communism have all offered a single class, group, or race as the source of contemporary man's troubles. They have also offered a much overly simplified solution for this trouble, concentrating either on the political or economic factors, and paying little attention to other factors. Other attempts have rejected such diagnoses and solutions as these as unrealistic and incomplete, as in the last analysis, ignoring every man's responsibility for getting into this situation as well as for getting out of it. To these latter attempts the traditions of Puritanism and the Enlightenment have contributed their common insistence on a man's responsibility for his ideas and his actions, as well as for the consequences that flow from them.

Another attempt to resolve the present predicament is seen in the widespread demand for meaning today. There is a general dissatisfaction with the categories of thought which we have inherited from the past, and a belief that they are no longer applicable to the current situation. The emphasis on time in certain aspects of modern thought (such as science and philosophy) has undermined the static forms and universals of our Greek heritage. The emphasis on experience has undermined the possibility of any a priori or deductive law. And some of the results of science and technology, such as nuclear weapons, have disabused man of his earlier belief that they could solve all his problems. Further, anthropological studies have seriously weakened Western man's earlier faith in the correctness and sufficiency of his own culture. And finally, recent psychological analysis has not only raised doubts concerning our religious categories, but has also

~~offered mythological substitutes for them.~~ The result of such developments as these has been an increasing need and demand for new and relevant categories which will not only be more adequate for the task which confronts man, but which will also offer him something more positive in which to believe.

find its benchmarks outside of nature.

There are, within the twentieth century, two major types of responses purporting to offer frameworks that will be meaningful. There is one which attempts to reach some transcendental or supernatural point of reference, and another which tries to find its point of reference within the confines of a nature much expanded by the contributions of recent thought. Within this latter naturalistic framework there have developed two different interpretations of meaning. The first of these has made a sustained attempt to reach some overall generalization, while the second is content to limit itself to specialized areas. It is along these three lines that the contemporary search for meaning appears to be running.

Any further discussion of contemporary problems and their attempted solutions must wait upon clarification of the word "meaning." What is needed at this point is a tentative definition, some interpretation of the "meaning of meaning." This word is used to refer to pattern or relatedness. It applies to both thoughts and actions. Its origin is often in the recognition of similarities in our experiences, on the basis of which we can say that two of these pieces of stone are jade but the third is not, or that one of these experiments will lead to the production of electricity while the other will not, or that one of these possible courses of action is more likely to be satisfying than the others. Through thus comparing and contrasting experiences, man developed such meaningful patterns as the universals of Aristotle and the laws of Newton.

There have been, in the past, two major aspects of these patterns of meaning, one which focused on their basis or status, while another focused on their range or scope. There have been two interpretations of the status of these patterns: one has pointed to the way in which they are arrived at out of man's experience and concluded that they were, therefore, relative to experience. The other has pointed to their efficacy for both knowing and acting, and has therefore concluded that these patterns are objective in status, referring and applicable to nature itself, and independent of man's experience of it. In general the former interpretation has been followed by the empiricists such as Hume, while the latter has been followed by the supernaturalists and rationalists such as Augustine and Hegel.

There have also been two interpretations of the range of these patterns. One has insisted that meaning can never be correct unless it is complete; while the other has argued that, as complete meaning is ever beyond our reach, patterns can be meaningful only if they are held within knowable and manageable limits. Those who insist on the completeness of meaning, the generalists as they are sometimes called, point to the fact that our world is becoming more

of a single unit than ever before and that, therefore, we are in desperate need of a meaning which is whole and complete. And, since the world is one, they argue, any partial pattern is, by definition, incomplete and therefore incorrect. Those who insist on the limited or restricted interpretation of the range of meaning, the specialists as they are sometimes called, point to the fact that the twentieth century world is so huge and complicated that we cannot know it all, and that we would therefore do better to restrict ourselves to manageable areas. In this way, they argue, at least what we do know will have solid grounding.

These two aspects of meaning have been complicated by the contributions of recent studies in such areas as physical science and cultural anthropology. These studies have emphasized the ideas of change, process, evolution, and history, all of which underscore the aspect of temporality and the fact of man's involvement in change. The impact of this body of ideas has been to weaken seriously the interpretation of meaningful patterns as static or mechanical. The fact that man is seen as an integral part of both nature and history has meant the reintroduction of the idea of purpose. Contemporary purposeful patterns which will include both the relative and the objective, the general and the particular within the framework of change and process are being sought. If such patterns can be found, they will answer our need for meaningful meaning. And it is to the search for such patterns that we must now turn.

There are two current general approaches to the problem of meaning which are, at best, incomplete and inadequate. Their inadequacy, however, does not mean that they have no contribution to make. What contribution they do make is largely in terms of helping us to understand the problem by pointing up what some people are looking for. Consequently, they do shed some light on the nature of the current predicament.

The first of these incomplete approaches is to be found in that new category of books which is listed under the heading of "self-help." Some of these books stress the need for and the methods of attaining harmonious adjustment and successful adaptation to the current scene. Both types urge a positive approach to life. But they are both inadequate because they conceive of the problem too narrowly, either urging escape from the world into some private world of inner security or counseling adjustment to the world as it is. The former judges the world as bad, the latter as good. And neither appears to understand the current demand for improving our world.

The second of these inadequate approaches is existentialism, a word meaning "to stand forth." A major strand of this movement is called French existentialism since its most widely known exponent is Jean-Paul Sartre (1905). It denies any form of deity for reasons similar to those of Holbach, and sees man as without any aid other than his own in solving his problems. Existentialism views the

Choice-making -

contemporary world as characterized by fluidity and viscosity, without any stable foothold on which to stand. Significantly, Sartre's first major work was entitled Nausea. The existentialist world is not only unstable, it is also powerful, dominated by occupying powers not unlike those which Sartre, as a member of the French resistance movement opposed during World War II. He sees himself condemned to live his entire life in such a world. He is left with but two choices, either to accept and become a collaborator with the occupying powers, or to denounce and deny such powers. If he makes either choice he is destroyed as an individual person. But, if he takes the second alternative there is in his defiance a moment of tragic triumph in which, before he is destroyed, he asserts the integrity and autonomy of the moral person. While this represents a counsel of despair, it does serve to highlight the full spread of power in our culture today as it impinges on the individual. Its inadequacy can be best seen in what must be regarded as a contradiction which, while holding man responsible for getting himself into his predicament, at the same time denies his ability to get himself out of it.

world in which the individual constantly has to be making choices. Assuming the best you can hope to be defeated like a man.

There are three other general approaches to the problem of meaning which are much more consistent and complete. The first of these demands a return to some of the absolutes of the past, such as the God of Augustine, the God of Aquinas, or the God of Aristotle. All three are based on the demand for an absolute with metaphysical and transcendent status as a source of meaning. There must be, so this argument runs, some priority which will be real, and not the fabrication of men's minds. Unless man stands for something, he will fall for anything.

The earliest of these demands for a rehabilitated absolute was that which found expression in the theistic existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). This "Danish Socrates" initiated the whole line of existentialist thought, one strand of which we have just noted in Sartre. Kierkegaard began with an attack on what he considered the main weaknesses of his time: Hegelian idealism, which too easily identified what ought to be with what is, and effectively denied the status of the individual in its dialectical abstractions ("You can't give a hungry man a cookbook."); scientific objectivity, which began by severing man's own interests and meanings from his knowing and never could get them reunited again; and the established Danish Lutheran church, which he charged identified Christianity with Christendom and the status quo. After this incisive attack on these aspects of his culture, Kierkegaard claimed that nineteenth century man had created an abstraction, the "public." This he could use to justify any of his whims and desires in a way identical with the reference to the "peoples" which we have already noted. Kierkegaard called for an entirely new set of categories which would be meaningful to man as an existent individual. These categories were to be three different ways of looking at life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, according to which man viewed life in terms of pleasure, duty, and

Kierkegaard's return to Augustine's God

God. There was no easy or rational progression from one of these to another; it was a matter of deliberate choice at each stage, hence Kierkegaard's nickname of Mr. Either/Or. He regarded the life of man as incomplete until he had reached the last stage in which he not only denounces but also renounces the world, and throws himself on the mercy and grace of God. God's forgiveness and grace Kierkegaard saw as sufficient to restore to man what he had lost, even as He had done for Job, in a process which he called reduplication. As a result of this, Kierkegaard was now able to look at his world through very different eyes, and to see it as something not to be exploited for his pleasure, but as a gift to be used for the glory of its giver.

The line of thought begun by Kierkegaard remained buried in Danish for a long time. Gradually his works were translated into German, and then in the 1930's into English. Because of his penetrating criticisms, which read as though they had been written in and for the twentieth century, his thought was picked up and used by some of the most influential Protestant theologians: Karl Barth (1886) in Germany, and Reinhold Niebuhr (1892) and Richard Niebuhr (1894) in the United States. But even those who have not been willing to accept his reinterpretation of Augustine's God have been greatly influenced by his negative criticisms. His analysis of Western man as creating the abstraction of the "public" to relieve himself of his moral and religious responsibility, and his creation of myths such as progress to relieve himself of his responsibility for decisive action, have been widely accepted. It is this dimension of his thought which has influenced not only French existentialism, but also many poets and dramatists. We will return to this influence in a later chapter.

"The last Christian died on the cross. Christianity is a hard religion. Impressed up on the stamp. Love-way forward to take over a ship."

Almost immediately after Kierkegaard but, as far as we know completely uninfluenced by him, there appeared another demand for a rehabilitated absolute, both like and yet unlike his. This was the strident demand of the German, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). The crucial difference between these two thinkers, often identified as the two major sources of current existentialism, is to be found in Nietzsche's complete denial of God. "God is dead," he proclaimed. Their similarities are, however, also very important. Both attacked liberalism in the various forms in which they experienced it. Both also insisted that man needed something to give priority in his life. And both insisted on the supremacy of will over reason. It is because of this that they are today linked together also as protagonists of irrationalism. Nietzsche's attack, after the "death" of God, centered on what he saw as the debilitating effects of the Enlightenment and liberalism on culture. The results of these movements were, in his eyes, a subversion of values to the point at which nothing was more important than anything else, and all values were determined by the majority. Liberalism, democracy, and socialism in all their forms were, for him, but the means by which the masses had dragged aesthetic and moral values down from the heights to their own level, the level of sensory pleasure. As a result, Western culture was completely lacking in standards.

Saw the way out through a super man - intellectual & moral superiority.

But Nietzsche ruled out any return to the old absolutes because of their denial of freedom and the integrity of the individual. Therefore man must (and this is how he interpreted all of history) create his own standards and values anew. Within a mass culture, such an attempt could not help but bring down on the head of the standard bearer an attack by the proponents of that culture. For this reason neither the "free spirit" who renounces current values nor the "superman" who affirms the new ones can escape being isolated from society and persecuted by it. But, for Nietzsche, this tragedy was to be welcomed rather than avoided, because it is only thus that such people can be sufficiently toughened to be adequate for their task. Since this almost dialectical approach was completely naturalistic, the philosophy of history which it implied was that of a Greek cyclical pattern of continual recurrence of the same situation over and over again.

Nietzsche's own denial of reason and his emphasis on the power of will was limited to art and ethics. Within this framework his thought offered what must be considered a helpful analysis, and for some a suggestive construction. But followers subverted Nietzsche's original emphasis and made his ideas the tools of political and military domination. While Nietzsche had seen the early Aryan who invaded the Greek and Indian peninsula as the bearer of the original higher values, it was the Nazis who denied the intention of his thought and turned it into a justification for their own program. They turned his cultural analysis into a racial analysis, and warped his cultural values into nationalistic ones. Such a perversion of Nietzsche suggests that any analysis of his thought must, in the first place, dissociate it from recent manifestations and, in the second place, must ask whether his analysis of our culture and his positive suggestions can ever be used without similar results.

The third of these demands for absolutes is represented by Roman Catholicism's current call for a return to the thought of Thomas Aquinas. The initiation of this movement, as well as of many other movements within the contemporary Roman church, came from one of the greatest recent popes, Leo XIII (1878-1903). In his letter, "On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy" (1879), he declared Thomism to be the basis for Roman teaching and the antidote for the rising tides of Kantianism, science, and liberalism. He called upon Roman Catholics to "restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas [and] extend and perfect the old by new truths." Universities were encouraged to concentrate on the study of Aquinas. The corpus of Thomistic writings was translated into English by the Dominicans.

Among the outstanding thinkers who have been drawn into this Catholic movement we can mention Etienne Gilson (1884), Jacques Maritain (1882), and Barbara Ward (1914). All three were converts and represent different attitudes toward Catholicism. Gilson, primarily the historian, is very appreciative of the mystical within medieval thought. Maritain has been more the rationalist follower of Thomas, the critic of contemporary non-Christian

political and social movements, and the brilliant exponent of what he calls Christian humanism. Barbara Ward, an English economist, has applied these latter principles to history and current world problems.

The contemporary strength of neo-Thomism is to be found primarily in two of its aspects. First, it has offered some of the most trenchant criticisms of the policies of Nazism, Fascism, and Communism; the economics of socialism and capitalism; and the basic ideas of liberalism and the Enlightenment. It sees all of these as basically self-defeating and destructive of the true nature of man as interpreted by Aristotle and Aquinas. Second, neo-Thomism has insisted that man is in need of some authority to guide him, and that such authority is to be found supremely in the Roman church. It is, however, at this point that many Protestant and liberal thinkers, while they may accept much of neo-Thomism's analysis and criticism, balk. It is not only their refusal to accept such an authority that brings them to a halt, but it is also their belief that both Aristotelianism and Thomism are inadequate when dealing with the contemporary emphases on process and pluralism.

It is just this combination of a need felt for authority with the refusal to accept it in any political or religious institution which has led to a call by some to return to Aristotle without Aquinas. This appeal, however, bears no similarity to that of Simplicio in Galileo's Dialogue. This neo-Aristotelianism argues that liberalism results in meaninglessness, and finally in an appeal to power. It insists that twentieth century science, which we will examine more carefully in a later chapter, has drawn so heavily on the thought of Hume and Kant that all it can offer man is the knowledge of his experiences, but no knowledge of that noumenal world which alone makes those very experiences possible. Lacking this objective referent to the metaphysically real world, twentieth century thought is without any other standard than what pleases man. Consequently, the neo-Aristotelians argue, our contemporary culture has degenerated into the production of mere stimulants. And, as man has built up his tolerance for such stimulants, our art especially has become more and more distorted, unnatural, and abnormal in order to be able to produce the same "kick" or "charge." This results in the appearance of increasingly monstrous productions.

The same thing, it is maintained, has happened to our ethical values and standards. Since all values are to be interpreted in terms of pleasure or happiness, there is no limit to which they can be subverted. This situation is all the more disastrous in politics, where the denial of any real values results in their being no limits put upon our expanding political institutions.

Two important spokesmen for this neo-Aristotelianism (sometimes referred to as realism in the older sense of that word) are the Englishmen, C. E. M. Joad (1891), and the American, Robert M.

Hutchins (1909). It was World War II which turned Joad into a neo-Aristotelian. He concluded that there must be some values if the contemporary world were not to be destroyed. Hutchins arrived at similar conclusions as a result of his experience with American higher education. This he saw as dominated by three isms: scientism, presentism, and instrumentalism. It has been largely due to the influence of Hutchins and his adherents that the Great Books Foundation was started, and that its programs for the study of these books are being offered throughout the United States today.

One of the major criticisms of neo-Aristotelianism points to the fact that, within a culture that calls itself Christian, it has in the past led to Roman Catholicism and could do so again, something which these critics want to avoid. A second criticism points to the Aristotelian interpretation of man as dependent on the state. This interpretation not only contradicts the liberal view, but also raises the possibility of the return of a political institution to implement such absolutist ideas. A third criticism asks who would interpret and implement Aristotelian ideals, assuming they were accepted. This is the old question of who would counsel the counselor. And it is perhaps this last criticism which is the most influential.

A second major generalized attempt to find meaning is conservatism. It is not uninfluenced by the criticisms of those who would return to some form of absolutism. In most cases it agrees with them entirely, even with some of Nietzsche's criticisms. But here the similarity ends and the conservative, following lines already laid down by such thinkers as Burke, eschews the absolutes of religion and philosophy for the more malleable standards of history and tradition. The conservative criticizes the absolutes of both political right and left. He also insists on dealing with the particular and concrete, rather than the general and abstract.

The conservative philosophy of history can often be characterized by its emphasis on persisting elements, rather than on advancement and progress, insisting on the continuity of history rather than its discontinuity. As a result of this emphasis, the conservative steers a mean course between both optimism and pessimism, while at the same time strongly disclaiming any form of utopianism. Like Burke, he sees the ideas of which he is so critical as the result of the Enlightenment's oversimplification of history. Likewise, he looks upon the liberal idea of man as overly optimistic. Priding himself on his realism, as he defines that word, the conservative claims to take into account all of the relevant facts and factors before taking action.

The constructive contribution of conservatism is grounded in the interpretation of man as an individual who is morally free and responsible. But neither his freedom nor his responsibility is viewed as self-sufficient or complete. He is free within an historical context, or tradition, one that is entailed, as Burke put it. He is responsible both to the past and the future. What is possible is therefore just as important as what ought to be; and

what man cannot do is just as relevant as what he can do.

The conservative is also interested in the smaller foci of power as well as the larger. Paralleling liberalism's original concern for the smaller institutions, he emphasizes the family, business, and education as necessary for the moral development of the individual, and as checks on the possibility of any single institution's developing into an all-encompassing totality. His pluralism thus applies to institutions as well as individuals.

When the word "conservative" is used loosely today, it can cover a number of different movements, some of which, like Nazism and Fascism, are totalitarian. But, while conservatives may insist on the need for authority, few would permit it to become absolute. Here the conservative joins forces with the liberal, and rejects the idea that any individual, party, class, or state can achieve a complete and total view, much less implement it, without destroying freedom. The main line of conservative thought is today represented best in many ways by the thought, as well as the life, of Sir Winston Churchill (1874). And much of its appeal is found in its insistence on values other than the purely economic.

The critics of contemporary conservatism point to the fact that it has usually been grounded upon a traditional aristocracy such as England's. But at least in that form aristocracy is a declining force in the Western World. The leaders of business, who might play the role, have yet to show the necessary vision or standards. A second criticism concerns the possibility of reestablishing the importance of the smaller institution in our time. To carve out islands of independence in the contemporary scene, which is dominated by huge and powerful institutions, is to swim against the tide. A third question concerns the status of the values of conservatism. Time and change have entered into our culture so radically that our current values tend to be impermanent and relative.

A fourth attempt to establish some meaning is a continuation of yet another of the major Western intellectual traditions. It is grounded in the thought of Kant and Mill as that line has been developed by William James (1842-1910) in pragmatism and John Dewey (1859-1952) in instrumentalism. This line of thought is sometimes referred to as experimental naturalism. Unlike some strands of empiricism, which are content to offer only partial views, instrumentalism continues the monistic attempt to gain a complete world-view, but in terms of its method rather than by metaphysics. In this way it tries to take account of the criticisms of Enlightenment thought as being too narrow. *the essence of natural science is it with*

Instrumentalism is strong in its criticism of all absolutes and finalities. Supernaturalism in all its forms is ruled out as, by definition, beyond the realm of human experience. It is impossible so the instrumentalists argue, either to experience anything super-

natural, or to attain any supernatural goal. Ultimate and final ends, especially those of the Aristotelian variety, are severely criticized as being inadequate for a world dominated by time and evolution. First causes of the Newtonian type are also beyond experience. Any appeal to such absolutes is looked upon as a "failure of nerve." Instrumentalism views conservatism as a vain attempt to turn the clock back. And it sees existentialism as an inaccurate statement of the problem of modern man.

The constructive side of instrumentalism is based on the Enlightenment argument that, since science has already done so much to free man from outworn ideas and to put in our hands the techniques by means of which to control our natural environment, it should be enlarged to apply to our contemporary social problems as well. Such a method, developed to include scientific experimentation and artistic creativity, is accepted as self-correcting. Starting from the Enlightenment idea of individual man as basically good and ignorance as his only source of evil, and calling on the moral drive and activist approach of Kant, the instrumentalist approaches our contemporary problems as basically external rather than internal. Insisting on a scientific objectivity with regard to social problems, this approach rejects the subjectivist tendency of romanticists and existentialists. Within this framework, ideas are seen as instruments to aid man in improving his condition rather than as abstract absolutes. Ideas are thus primarily what they were for Bentham: tools for the reform of society.

Thought within this instrumentalist tradition has been working in two major directions, the scientific and the cultural. The scientific is based on the assumption of a self-sufficient nature as it is known by experience; any unexperienced nature, as well as anything transcendent, is ruled out by definition. This means that man, as an integral part of nature conceived in this way, is capable of having ideas which are not separate from nature-as-experienced. Such an interpretation presents a picture of nature as dynamic and evolutionary, one for which Aristotelian universals and Newtonian laws are no longer adequate. This also means that any deductive or a priori rationalistic methods are ruled out. To a nature which is itself experimental, only an experimental method can be applied. So the ideas which are developed in this context are of the status of hypotheses which, experimentally employed, are a source of valid knowledge. Such knowledge, never final or absolute, is the only kind of knowledge.

The cultural direction of instrumentalism has changed considerably from the days when William James tried to prove the worth of moral values in terms of their "cash value." John Dewey took all such values to be instruments for improving the human situation. Ideas thus have the ideal component, and are capable of making room within human experience for aesthetic and religious, as well as ethical, values and meanings. Such an interpretation of ideas has the advantage of keeping society open for further advances, as well as keeping it basically pluralistic. Pluralism in this

context emphasizes the basic importance of the individual, and instrumentalism's unwillingness to allow any person to be but a means to the end of some institution.

One aspect of instrumentalism calls for special mention at this point: its emphasis on education. In this, it is once again in line with liberalism's belief that education is the best way to achieve democratic goals by democratic means. As we shall see in a later chapter, instrumentalism has been closely related to a major change in American culture which came with the introduction of "progressive education."

Instrumentalism has been under attack from many different angles, the most publicized being directed at its educational policy. Asking the question: "Why can't Johnny read?" many people have been arguing for the return to a more disciplined type of education. Absolutists of all stripes have criticized instrumentalism's lack of final values which, they argue, destroys any meaning its values may have. Some scientists and philosophers have argued against using logical and mathematical categories as mere problem-solving instruments, insisting on their objectivity or necessity. The Declaration of Independence was either signed in 1776 or it was not, and no amount of discussion about the status of mathematical concepts can change that fact, or the fact that the event followed the Boston Tea Party and preceded the signing of the Constitution. Existentialists as well as others have insisted that the objectivity in which instrumentalism prides itself cannot be applied to the social areas in the same way that it can be applied to the nonsocial. Others have insisted that the philosopher's job is to try to understand the world, rather than change it, and that understanding which is conceived primarily as an instrument of change and reform cannot give an accurate picture of the world as it is. Some political thinkers have suggested that instrumentalism can be infected with power as well as other philosophies. They argue that its dependence on public validation leaves open the possibility that those in power may be able to determine the results of its experiments. For reasons such as these the question is being raised whether instrumentalism has achieved a self-correcting method any more than the older metaphysics achieved a self-correcting world-view. Nevertheless, instrumentalism is still the most influential philosophy in the United States today. Many people who might not even recognize it by name are using it, in part or in whole, as a guide to their thoughts and actions.

In addition to the specific criticisms already mentioned, the three general approaches to the problem of meaning which we have discussed have been subjected to criticism equally general. One of these criticisms points to the fact that, in order to attain significant levels of generality, large areas of experience are left out. Conversely, any broad generalizations tend to become such abstractions that they are of only limited applicability. To arrive at these generalizations it is necessary to become less and

less critical, and to override the finer distinctions which are meaningful in the intricate problems of both scientific and personal experience. Another criticism suggests that generalities and generalizations of any type can become the means of forcing individuals into set patterns of thought and action. While both of these criticisms need to be specified in detail if they are to avoid the charge of generalizing that there can be no generalizations, they do express an underlying uneasiness which most Western men feel when confronted by such inclusive ideas. This uneasiness also makes common cause with the feeling that there is today so much to know that no one man can grasp it all, much less be an authority sufficient to direct the activities of others. And because of this Western man is more apt to feel at home working within specialized areas.

The number of specialized areas of study has grown during recent years to the point where even a listing of them in some intelligible order is a staggering task. Listing is all the more difficult because so many of the contemporary specializations represent attempts to bridge disciplines hitherto thought of as separate. Thus we have today such new areas as biochemistry, astrophysics, and cultural anthropology. There is also an increased emphasis on the theoretical aspects of many of these new disciplines, such as theoretical physics. In philosophical studies this trend can be seen in the reintroduction of the old Aristotelian prefix "meta," resulting in such studies as metalogue and metaethics. We have chosen but five of these specialized areas for further study in the remaining chapters of this book.

The areas which have been chosen represent some of the most significant growing edges of our civilization today. It is impossible to do more than suggest what is going on in these five areas. But they will indicate some of the more important directions in which contemporary thought is moving. By sampling what is going on in these areas we can get an indication at least of where men are looking, what they are looking for, and what they find exciting.

As we examine these specialized areas it will become clear that even they are not without their wider implications in terms of both thought and application. This fact is not just a coincidence or the result of contemporary man's need for more generalized theories. It is also a result of the modern empirical methods of contemporary thinkers. Having established the adequacy or applicability of some idea in a restricted area, such as mythmaking in a primitive society, the student then experiments with this idea in other areas as well. Does it apply to other primitive societies? Does it also apply to more civilized societies? The very thrust of inquiry today, without any of the older limits, carries it across the boundaries of its immediate concern, and out into uncharted areas as well. It is mainly because of this inquiring drive that most contemporary studies evidence not only the specialized and more generalized interests, but a continual alternation between both. And it is well that this is so because, without

specialized knowledge, the generalists could easily become abstract to the point of nonrelevance, and without general ideas the specialists could easily become isolated, with the same results.

A second observation may be apposite. Ideas of great thinkers have often been imposed by their disciples or by men of later periods on others. Perhaps at this very point we may be able to locate a unique challenge to contemporary Western culture: to find such ideas as will solve our problems, without making them instruments of oppression to our fellowmen. Herein may be found not only the contemporary challenge, but also the contemporary opportunity.

Of all the places in which to prepare to meet such a challenge, there is none better (we might be indulged for hoping) than a college. Here, where there are students at all stages of development and maturity, interested in a variety of specializations, there is a unique opportunity to explore some particular areas and, at the same time, discover their interconnectedness. Such a community makes possible the cross-fertilization of ideas as in almost no other type of institution or community. Here the student has the opportunity to take his mind on training flights in all sorts of discussions. Here, in class and in dormitory sessions, he is able to develop the ability to stand on his mental feet, sharpen his wits in the give and take of argument, develop the ability to stick to the argument, locate the weak points in the opponent's line of thought, and search for new and better ways of solving problems both old and new. Having developed such an ability, Western man may be better equipped to produce a solution that will not have to be imposed on his fellows.