

A PHILOSOPHICAL RATIONALE FOR GENERAL EDUCATION*

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A meaningful and effective general education program should be grounded in an analysis of "the human situation." The human situation may be described via the development of three interrelated themes: (1) the general structure of human existence (or of human nature); (2) the nature of "the human condition," i.e., of those basic and traumatic problems (or "existential situations") which all humans must, at some time, encounter; and (3) the nature of the contemporary age, the age in which mankind is now historically situated. A careful study and interpretation of these three dimensions of the human situation will give rise to a large number of sub-themes which, in turn, may be employed as foundational foci for a comprehensive, coherent, and "existentially" meaningful program of general studies for all college students. Based upon the human situation, i.e., that which all humans have in common, such a program of education would be truly "general" in the best sense of the word.

The Structure of Human Existence

What are the fundamental characteristics of human existence? What are the basic or universal components of "human nature"? What does the expression "human being" mean? The following paragraphs constitute an attempt to answer these sorts of questions and to suggest the ways in which a program of general education might be made expressive of and responsive to the overall structure of human existence.

The Human Person as a Psycho-Somatic Being. The human person¹ is a psycho-somatic being, a dynamic unity of "soul" (psyche) and body (soma). He is an "embodied self" or "lived body," moved by desires (appetites, passions), subject to a wide variety of emotional (or affective) states, endowed with a will (or volitional power) that enables him to choose to do or not to do this or that, and in possession of a potent intellect through which he may formulate ideas, judgments, beliefs, and theories about himself and his world. Some would argue, further, that the human person is also a "spiritual" being, whose deepest needs are supernatural rather than natural, and who is ultimately oriented toward a reality (God?) which stands beyond (transcends) the ordinary world of space and time. The view that the human person is endowed with "spirit" (*pneuma*) as well as with "soul" (psyche) and body (soma), although controversial, should not be ignored since, after all, it may be true. Initially, therefore, the human person is to be understood as a biofunctional, appetitive, affective, volitional, intellectual, and (possibly) spiritual being.

The development of the human person, as a physical, psychical, and spiritual being, should be a major focus of general education. Through biological studies and through programs of

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health and physical education, the human person should be given the opportunity to understand himself as a physical presence in the world and to develop a "sound body." The psychical components of the human person form the primary object of investigation for the modern discipline of psychology, a discipline with which an educated person should have at least some familiarity. The appetitive, affective, volitional, and intellectual dimensions of human nature are also studied in philosophy, particularly in moral philosophy (or ethics). What is the moral significance of the distinction between "natural desires" (needs) and "acquired desires" (wants)? To what extent should the individual be guided by his desires or emotions, as opposed to his intellect, in his volitional acts (choices)? What choices, in any given situation, are morally permissible, and what choices are morally impermissible? Is it possible to know and define "moral truth," or are all moral valuations and acts non-cognitive (emotive, subjective, arbitrary)? These are the kinds of questions moral philosophers try to answer; it is not clear that psychologists do or should try to answer such questions. But both psychology and moral philosophy are worthy attempts to comprehend a significant sector of the human situation.²

The intellectual dimension of the human psyche is, of course, the province of all serious academic disciplines. The development of the human intellect is the central and predominant concern of pedagogical theory and practice.³ And a systematic program of general education in linguistic competence, mathematics and the natural sciences, the social sciences, and humanistic studies is absolutely essential in challenging the student's intellect and encouraging its development.

The "spiritual" orientation of human nature is the special province of religious studies – i.e., theology; the history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy of religion; the analysis of religious literature and art; etc. Whether the human person is endowed with "spirit" or not, it is beyond question that he has "spiritual" interests and concerns; and the latter form the theoretical basis for religious studies as a component of general education.

The Human Person as a World-Related Being. In the words of Jose Ortega y Gasset, "I am myself plus my circumstances."⁴ Human existence is rooted in a milieu, in a "lived world." As a being-in-and-toward-the-world, the human person is what he is for-the-world-and-in-relation-to-the-world, and his world is what it is for-him-and-in-relation-to-him. The existence of the human person is a relational existence. To understand himself, the human person must understand his world; and to understand his world, he must understand himself. The life of learning will therefore require much reflection upon the relations and interactions between the human person and his world, upon both the "inside" and the "outside" of human existence, upon the "internal" (physical, psychical, and spiritual) aspects of the self and upon the "external" (natural and social) conditions of its existence. In addition to study in the fields of physical education, psychology, ethics, and religion, a well-developed program of general education will require serious analysis of the "external world" via the natural (physical and biological) and social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, etc.).

The Human Person as an Other-Related Being. "Man is, by nature, a political [or social] animal" (Aristotle).⁵ The human person is, at least in part, an individual, related to his world through the medium of his subjective experience. But as soon as he is aware of himself as an

individual, the human person recognizes that he exists in a social world, that his own personhood emerges and develops in relation to other human persons. It is by way of his interactions with other persons that the human individual comes to know "himself." Thus, a fundamental aspect of the relational framework of subjective experience is the phenomenon of intersubjectivity, the appearance of "the Other" as a structural component of the world in which the human person lives (the "life-world," to use Husserl's terminology⁶). The life-world is a populated world, a world containing, not only the individual self, but also other selves. It is, moreover, a world which is socially, economically, and politically structured – a socio-cultural "system." And it is largely within the matrix of self-other interaction that the human individual must define himself, his values, and his reality. He cannot understand himself or fulfill himself without taking "the others" and the "system" into serious account. In this context, study in the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, social and political philosophy, ethics, language and communications, literature, and history is obviously relevant and desirable.

The Temporal Structure of Human Existence. The human person is a "being-in-time." His existence is temporally and historically structured. The temporality of human existence is a flow which is primarily present (or "now"): experientially, the human past and future are located in the now. Whatever is for me, is now; and whatever is of importance or whatever is meaningful for me, is of importance or is meaningful now, even if that which is important and meaningful for me is located in the "past" or in the "future." Existential time is time lived in the now. The life-world is situated in terms of the "living present," and it is within this "living present" that my life unfolds and discloses itself. Thus, to gain full contact with oneself, it is necessary to focus one's attention upon the present and to appropriate that present (that "existential situation") as one's own.

This "philosophy of the present"⁷ need not lead to a careless "live only for today" attitude. Our past is always with us (in the form of memory, history, tradition, etc.), and provides a context for the living present. We live in the present, but also out of the past. And to live well now, we cannot afford to "forget" the past. A fully meaningful human existence must be lived now, but with continual reference to the past: we must continue to affirm "that which has been good," and we must work to eliminate or to avoid "that which has been bad."

Moreover, a full human existence must be lived, not only "in-the-present-out-of-the-past," but also "in-the-present-toward-the-future." The human present opens toward the future. "Today" must always be lived with a concern for "tomorrow." We are always moving toward the future, whether we like it or not. And this fact requires us to continually review and revise our lives, to resist our tendency to fall into a "forgetfulness" which cuts us off from our future as well as from our past. If we "remember" the past by way of memory, we must also "remember" the future by way of anticipation (hope, expectation, anxiety, despair, etc.). We are "called" into the future, toward ever new possibilities; and we must, if we wish to live well, develop a "right-mindedness" which orients our present-centered consciousness toward the possibilities and challenges of the impending future. It is true that we "live now," and that we ought not try, against the nature of things, to either live in the past or in the future. But since our lives and the social systems in which we live are temporally and historically structured, we must "live now"

with reference to both past and future; we must "live-in-the-present-out-of-the-past-and-toward-the-future."

Thus, there is an objective basis in the structure of human existence for the study of time. Scientific theories of time should be considered via physics and the philosophy of science. The human sense and experience of time is a theme frequently developed in works of art and literature and which can also be studied psychologically. History, of course, is the study of the human past and its significance, and should be a central component of all programs of general education. Perhaps the future can also be made an object of academic study, but trendy, faddish, and vacuous discussions of "future shock" or "futuristics" are not to be encouraged.

The Human Person as a Free, Creative, and Responsible Being. The human person is an (actually or potentially) active being. He experiences himself as having choices, as confronted with situations which require choices on his part, creative responses to his world. He does not experience himself as being totally controlled by forces independent of his will. His world presents obstacles to him, and yet he experiences himself as being able to respond to those obstacles in a variety of ways. His freedom and creativity are conditioned (qualified, limited) by the world, but not nonexistent or unreal. He is not a merely passive being. Rather, he acts toward his world by way of his choices and through his awareness of his choices. One loses one's freedom when one is unaware of one's choices, or when one refuses to face the fact that one has (or has made) choices. Unawareness of one's choices and refusal to recognize or acknowledge one's choices is "bad faith" (Sartre) or "inauthenticity" (Heidegger).⁸ To deny one's freedom and creativity is to deny one's personhood; it is to regard oneself as a thing or an object; it is to evade the concrete reality of one's existential responsibility (response-ability). Choice is a reality of subjective experience, and to live authentically and fully, one must "own" one's freedom and take responsibility for the choices one makes (or has made). To acknowledge (indeed, to insist upon) one's freedom, creativity, and responsibility is to live as a person rather than as a thing.

The nature, scope, and limits of human freedom, creativity, and responsibility can be studied from the standpoint of a number of disciplines: the natural and social sciences (with reference to the "causes" of human behavior); philosophy and theology; art and literature; history; etc.

The Human Person as a Moral Being. The human person is, by nature, a being with moral sensibility. He pursues that which he regards as "the good," and avoids that which he regards as "evil;" he approves of "the right," and disapproves of "the wrong." Moral choice and moral judgment are central and pervasive dimensions of human thought and action. And ethical controversy, discourse, and theorizing are practically unavoidable aspects of life in all but the most primitive of human societies. The human person is driven to make "moral sense" of his life and of his world, to pursue "the good" and to do "the right," or at least to understand why he and his fellow humans fail to do so. He needs a moral system, and he may need to employ the tools of ethical reasoning and analysis in the event that his moral system breaks down at some crucial point. No systematic approach to the problems of human existence and education, therefore, can neglect the moral dimensions of human life, whether individually or socially considered.

The subject-matter of this section falls within the purview of ethical theory: descriptive ethics, as performed by historians and social scientists; and normative and meta-ethics, which constitute the major content of philosophical ethics (moral philosophy).

The Human Person as a Symbol-Using Being. The relationship between the human person and his world is mediated by gestural, linguistic, aesthetic, mathematical, and other conceptual symbols. It is by way of his "symbolic interactions" with others and with his world that the human person establishes his individual and social identity.⁹ To fulfill himself as distinctively human, the human person must become proficient in the use of symbols; he must be able to think, speak, and write critically, precisely, and clearly (preferably in more than one language); he must be able to read with understanding; he must explore and become familiar with the symbolism of the arts. Significant participation in the world of "symbolic interactions" will also require the human person to become an effective listener. And in the contemporary world, he cannot afford to remain ignorant of the ways in which mass communications technologies (such as television) and cybernetics (computer technology) have influenced and are influencing the structures of human symbolic consciousness: failure to understand the nature and function of mass communications media and computer systems is, given the impact of these technologies upon contemporary life, a form of illiteracy.

The foregoing analysis of the role of symbols in human thought and action demonstrates that a serious program of general studies must include a major emphasis upon skillful and effective reading, writing, speaking, and listening; upon mastery of the fundamental principles of logic; upon basic mathematical competence; upon aesthetic understanding and appreciation; upon "computer literacy;" and upon comprehension of the strengths and limitations of mass communications technologies.

The Human Person as Producer and Consumer. To survive and to thrive, the human person must produce and consume a wide variety of both material and psycho-spiritual goods (e.g., food, shelter, clothing, social institutions, art, philosophy, etc.). The human person is endowed with significant creative powers, and his creativity expresses itself in his work. To actualize his creative potential, the human person must have the opportunity to do meaningful work.¹⁰ And since he is a finite and contingent being, whose very existence depends in large part upon his access to goods external to himself (e.g., food, social order, etc.), he is, by necessity, a consumer of both natural and humanly-created products and commodities. Both the sustaining and enhancement of human existence are therefore grounded in "the dialectic of need and labor" (Hegel),¹¹ the necessities of production and consumption.

Thus, the effort to comprehend the nature of human existence must include an exploration of the significance of production and consumption (and of work and leisure) in the lives of human beings and societies. "What have been the historical, philosophical, religious, and social attitudes toward work around the world? How are notions of work related to social status and human dignity? What determines the different status and rewards we grant to different forms of work? Why is some work highly rewarded and other work relatively unrewarded?"¹² These are the kinds of questions that need to be answered in this context, since production, consumption, work, and leisure are such basic dimensions of the human situation.

And here, either disciplinary or interdisciplinary studies in the fields of economics, psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, and theology would be of great relevance.¹³

The Human Condition

As argued above, the human person is an embodied being – a physical presence in the world – who is, by nature, related to the world and to other humans. He is endowed with a psycho-spiritual self which endures through time (i.e., a continuing personal identity), which is relatively free and creative with reference to its world, and which possesses highly potent intellectual-rational powers. The human person naturally seeks to maintain himself in existence, to perfect his relationships with his world and with his fellow humans, to express and develop himself freely and creatively, and to understand himself and his world. That is, he seeks to become a "whole person," to achieve total well-being (eudaimonia). As Aristotle pointed out, it is natural for human beings to desire happiness.¹⁴

But man cannot achieve his existential goals; he cannot attain the happiness he seeks. He exists in a state of alienation, cut off from the fullness of being, separated from his own desired fulfillment. The "human condition" is such that the individual is necessarily prevented from completing his pursuit of happiness. A realistic system of general education, based upon a realistic theory of human existence, must take this tragic truth into serious account.

Self-Consciousness and the Alienation of Self and Other. The human person is a self-conscious individual. That is, he is aware of himself as distinct from that which lies outside and beyond his mind and body. Self-consciousness is the experience of oneself as an individuated being, separate and different from other beings. Within the horizon of self-consciousness, the self recognizes a discontinuity between "inside" and "outside," between ego and other, between "I" and "It." This discontinuity between the "I" and the "It" means that the individual's relationship with his world is problematic. There is a "brokenness" at the very core of human existence, a "primal split" between self and not-self, an experience of estrangement or alienation in which the individual feels "cut off" from his world – from other persons, from his natural environment, from the universe, from being-in-general. This "brokenness" of human experience might be characterized as "ontological alienation," an alienation from being (ontos) which is grounded in the very conditions of human existence itself. Thus, a basic need and central task of human existence is to establish a meaningful and harmonious relationship between the individual and his world, between the "I" and the "It," between the human person and being-as-such.

In attempting to work out a meaningful and harmonious relationship between himself and his world, the human person is faced with enormous difficulties. His relationships with other persons are undermined by competition, distrust, envy, hostility, hatred, rejection, and other kinds of interpersonal conflict. His relationship with the physical world is menaced by economic scarcity, by natural catastrophes such as floods and famines, and by bodily pain and disease. And finally, the relationship between the individual and his world is ultimately and absolutely threatened by the loss of life itself, by death. Given the tensions of interpersonal relationships, the limits of his economic and ecological well-being, and the realities of pain, disease, and death, the human person inevitably experiences psychic suffering in the form of

anxiety, confusion, self-doubt, guilt, grief, dread, despair, and so on. And yet, in spite of these obstacles, the human race has never ceased its searching for integration, fulfillment, and meaning. Throughout history, human beings have sought to transcend the limitations of their existences by turning to a wide variety of religious and philosophical systems; and through these systems, they have attempted to interpret, to comprehend, to "live with," and to "hope beyond" the structures of the human condition. But still, the relationship between self and not-self, between man and being, remains problematic; the "primal split" remains unhealed.

The themes of self-other alienation and of the human need for meaningful relationships are central to the fields of philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, and the arts. These fields of inquiry and reflection are thus crucially relevant to the aims of general education.

The Insufficiency of Human Existence. The human individual is a finite and incomplete being who desires infinite completeness. He is finite in that his powers – and indeed his very existence – are restricted and limited; and he is incomplete in that he lacks wholeness, he is not self-sufficient, and his existence is dependent upon forces outside himself. Thus, the human individual is not "at home" in his world. He is never satisfied with "what is." He always questions his existence, his culture, and his view of the universe. He is a restless being, continually moving (both in thought and in action) beyond himself, beyond his culture, beyond his accepted definitions of reality. He is forever moving into "the open," toward "something undefined" (and perhaps indefinable). Man's radical discontentment and restlessness are manifestations of his estrangement from the fullness of being and are also the motivating forces in his search for fulfillment, for wholeness and integration. Human discontentment and restlessness ("homelessness") are symptoms of the human individual's finitude and incompleteness; and they represent an "ontic gesture," a movement toward being, toward the plenitude of infinite completeness. But within the framework of his worldly existence, the finite and incomplete individual cannot complete his "ontic gesture" – he cannot achieve the infinite completeness that he so deeply desires. He remains "homeless," deficient in being, discontented, and always restless.¹⁵

The finitude, incompleteness, and "homelessness" of human existence are objects of systematic analysis and interpretation in such disciplines as philosophy and religion, literature and the arts, psychology, and so on.

Guilt, Meaninglessness, and Death. The human person seeks to live righteously, meaningfully, and (if possible) forever.¹⁶ But in seeking to live righteously, the individual encounters the phenomenon of guilt, i.e., the awareness that he fails repeatedly to fulfill the requirements of the "moral law" (those moral principles that he recognizes as, in some sense, authoritative and binding upon him). Again and again, he fails to do what he regards as right, both with reference to himself and to others. In taking morality seriously, in seeking to live a truly ethical life (a life of duty, obligation, and responsibility), the individual is confronted with his own moral insufficiency, his "sin." And his guilt renders his righteousness illusory.¹⁷

In seeking to live meaningfully, the human person must face the problem of meaning. He must ask himself, "What is the meaning of existence in general, and what is the meaning of my own

existence in particular?" And then he must acknowledge that there is no simple answer to this twofold question – and that perhaps there is no answer whatsoever to the question of meaning. The problem of meaning is a problem that is never definitively or finally solved. It must be faced again and again as one moves through one's life. Human existence involves a search for meaning, but not necessarily a discovery of meaning. There always remains the possibility that life is, in fact, meaningless, and that the search for meaning is "a chase after wind."

In seeking to live forever, in hoping for immortality, the individual is threatened by death. Human life is a movement toward death; the human individual is a "being-toward-death" (Heidegger). "As soon as a human being is alive, he is old enough to die" (Heidegger).¹⁸ Death, the threat of nothingness, is the ultimate sign of man's lack of the fullness of being, of his "ontological alienation." The fact of death is an absolute threat to human hope and to the quest for meaning in life because death is the effective end of both hope and meaning. "Whether hope is a meaningful attitude toward existence or the most extreme foolishness is ultimately decided in the questions about whether there is something to hope for beyond death... All hope appears to be foolish, if death is the end."¹⁹ "Death is never that which gives meaning to life: it is, on the contrary, that which actually deprives life of all significance. If we have to die (and if death is the absolute termination of human existence), our life has no sense because our problems do not receive any kind of solution and because the very meaning of the problems remains undetermined" (Sartre).²⁰ If death is the absolute end of human existence, then man's need for immortality will never be met, and his movement toward the fullness of being (toward infinite completeness) will never be completed. "He who laughs has not heard the dreadful news" (Bertold Brecht).

The phenomena of guilt, meaninglessness, and death are central themes in a number of academic disciplines: e.g., philosophy; religious studies; psychology; anthropology and sociology; studies in literature and the arts; and so on. With reference to the problem of death, the biological sciences are also on point.

The Contemporary Age

In the preceding sections, the general structure of human existence and of the "human condition" were discussed. In the project of building a systematic and coherent philosophy of general education, it is essential to consider, not only the "universal," but also the "local" conditions of the human situation. Thus, in what follows, the object of analysis will be "man in the modern age."²¹ What are the basic and central characteristics of the world in which modern mankind must live? What are the major structural contours of the contemporary age?

The Process of Modernization. The modern world has been a long time in the making. The Commercial Revolution, which began as early as the 11th century in the mercantile cities of northern Italy, brought into existence the modern capitalist economy, created a new geography based upon a developing world-wide commercial system, and made the commercial middle-classes and the emerging nation-state two of the most fundamental features of modern world politics. The Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries laid the groundwork (in art, literature, philosophy, and politics) for a modern secular, humanistic, and individualistic view of life, a perspective on man and the universe significantly different from the Catholic-Christian world-

view of the Middle Ages. With the Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries and the rise of various forms of Protestantism, all standing in opposition to Roman Catholicism, the religious unity of Western "Christendom" was shattered; and this fragmentation of Western Christianity led, in the long run, to the disestablishment and peripheralization of religion in modern culture (see *infra.*, pp. 12-13).

The secular view of life which had emerged during the Renaissance was given even firmer grounding as a result of the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. The "new science" was an attempt to understand the world via "natural reason" and on the basis of experimentation, observation, measurement, and "scientific" (i.e., naturalistic) explanation. The leading ideas of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution were given wide circulation during the 18th century Enlightenment period, by the philosophes in France, by Newton and Locke in England, and by Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson in America. The process of modernization received political expression in the American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century. And the Industrial Revolution, which began in the middle of the 18th century, was a further and highly significant phase of the modernization of Western (and world) culture in that it made technological development a fundamental component of social and civilizational progress.

The process of modernization may be defined in summary fashion as follows: In economic development, modernization requires heavy investment in improved transportation and communications systems. "This produces a transition from a localized subsistence economy to a regionally or nationally integrated market economy." High priority is placed on technological innovation and upon the substitution of machines for human labor (automation), and this results in a significant rise in productivity. Decentralized handcraft manufacturing is replaced by a centralized industrial system in which emphasis is placed upon the highly technological mass-production of standardized commodities. Industrial (as opposed to agricultural) production becomes the predominant form of economic activity.

In social terms, "modernization is marked by a growth in education, literacy, and mass communication and by a transition from a static, predominantly rural populace to an urbanizing population in which farms and villages become cultural as well as economic satellites of the urban/industrial market." In political life, modernization involves the rise of nationalism and the centralized state, as well as the creation of "the masses" as a major political force. Ideologically, modernization gives rise to world-views emphasizing change rather than tradition. "In sum, modernization is the transition from a rural, village-oriented system of traditional personal and family ties to a dynamic, urban, market-oriented system of impersonal relationships."²²

The process of modernization provides an excellent point of departure for interdisciplinary studies in all general education areas – communications, science and technology, the social sciences (especially sociology), history, philosophy, religion, literature, the arts, and so on.

Modernization and Change. A modernizing society is inevitably subject to rapid, radical, and continuing change. As suggested in the preceding section, the process of modernization transforms the economic, social, political, cultural, and intellectual conditions of human

existence. Customary ways of life, traditional values and beliefs, historically evolved social and political institutions, are all subjected to critical and rationalistic analysis, and are (either intentionally or unintentionally) altered by the progression of modernizing change. The nation-state and large-scale social organization ("bureaucratization") emerge as predominant forces in the lives of individuals, and traditional social and cultural institutions (such as the family, the church, the local community, the voluntary association) are at least to some significant degree eclipsed by the "larger" social and political powers of the modern age. The small world of personal relationships is encompassed by a much larger world of impersonal forces and interactions (the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*).

One result of such change is significant social alienation, which expresses itself in a large number of ways: the experience or rootlessness; the crisis of individual identity; loneliness and lack of relatedness between persons; a sense of powerlessness; the experience of normlessness (anomie); a sense of meaninglessness; a pervasive discontentment; radical deviance (rising crime, alcoholism, drug-abuse, mental illness, and suicide rates); and, in general, a widespread sense of disorientation, confusion, insecurity, and anxiety. But modernizing change also has what might be considered positive or "progressive" results: growing recognition of the existence, rights, and liberties of hitherto "forgotten" groups (racial and ethnic minorities, women, the poor, etc.); a greater range of economic, social, and political opportunities and choices for an ever-increasing number of individuals; better medical treatment; a "higher" standard of living for more and more people; and so on.

It is clear that the phenomenon of change and its multiform dimensions and consequences must constitute a central object of study for all those seeking an understanding of the contemporary world. Accordingly, a meaningful study of modern social change will include scientific, psychological, sociological, economic, political, and historical approaches.

Modern Thought. The predominant ideological outlook of the modern age is based upon a combination of three theoretical perspectives: (1) the attitude of scientific reason; (2) the doctrine of philosophical naturalism; and (3) the philosophy of secular humanism.²³

The attitude of scientific reason, in accordance with common sense, assumes the reality of the world; but unlike common sense, the attitude of scientific reason seeks to distinguish the objective reality of the world from the merely subjective "realities" of human experience. The attitude of scientific reason (or scientific rationalism) is a methodological predisposition to approach and appropriate the reality of the world on the basis of experimentation, observation, and quantification. On the basis of the experimental, observational, and mathematical methods of modern science, natural events are to be explained, predicted, and controlled. Confining itself to the quantifiable aspects of the observable (or phenomenal) world, scientific rationalism is preoccupied with the purely objective dimensions of the world.²⁴

The attitude of scientific reason tends to support **the doctrine of philosophical naturalism**, i.e., the view that reality is nothing but the world of nature which is observed, measured, explained, and controlled by the theories and methods of modern science. Philosophical naturalism is a form of "scientism," holding that all truth is scientific truth and that scientific method is the only reliable means of acquiring authentic knowledge of reality. For the philosophical naturalist (e.g.,

Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, B.F. Skinner), science gives us truth about the whole of reality (i.e., there are no realities not subject to scientific analysis), and, indeed, it gives us the ultimate truth (the "last word") about reality-as-such. From this point of view, anything that is not subject to scientific observation, explanation, and control is not to be regarded as real. Thus, for the philosophical naturalist, to believe in the existence of God, or in the immortality of the soul, or in the spiritual destiny of man, or in any other supernatural reality, is absurd and meaningless. Reality is basically physical, and the domain of "spirit" (subjectivity, valuation, consciousness) is merely epiphenomenal (i.e., causally dependent upon physical objectivity). Man is himself ultimately to be subjected to the objectifying techniques and methods of the natural sciences. Man and the world can be best understood in strictly scientific terms; and from the standpoint of scientific rationalism and philosophical naturalism, natural realities (quantifiable observables) are the only realities.

Secular humanism is the anthropological correlate of philosophical naturalism; it is, in effect, the application of philosophical naturalism to the questions of human existence. As such, secular humanism is the doctrine that the world of nature and society is the only real world; that man is nothing but a product and member of that natural-social "environment;" that man is the supreme being for man; and that happiness in this (natural-social) world is the greatest good that man can achieve. Most secular humanists will agree, at least in general terms, with the view of Karl Marx, that the human person is, in essence, a natural, social, and creative being, and that the actualization of his natural, social, and creative potential should be the primary object of his life.²⁵

There are, of course, large numbers of people living today (both intellectuals and non-intellectuals) who would reject the above-described ideology, who do not accept the principles and implications of scientific rationalism, philosophical naturalism, and secular humanism. Many "modern" people continue to subscribe to traditional (and non-traditional) religious perspectives which are non-scientific (not to say un-scientific), supernaturalistic, and theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Still, the ideology outlined in this section has been tremendously influential in shaping the intellectual, cultural, social, and political outlook of the contemporary age. And for that reason alone, the philosophical content, historical development, and cultural impact of the doctrines of scientism, naturalism, and humanism deserve serious and critical study. Without such study, the con-temporary structure and evolution of human civilization is utterly incomprehensible.

Science and Technology in the Modern World. If the ideological basis of the contemporary age is to be found in scientism, naturalism, and humanism, the practical foundations of modern life are to be found in science and technology. Modern society is a scientific and technological society in the sense that it is based upon the application of scientific principles of organization, management, and control to the problem of ordering nature and human life in an attempt to create the (natural-social) conditions of human fulfillment and happiness. A fundamental feature of the process of modernization is the effort to define and understand the world in scientific terms and to alter and control the world by technological means.

Thus, to live effectively as a person and as a citizen in the modern world, one must have at least a minimal knowledge of the nature of science and of the operations of the technological

order. And yet, it would appear that very few people in modern society have even the slightest familiarity with the basic principles of modern science and technology, let alone some competence in a scientific or technological field of inquiry and action. For too many, the world of modern science and technology is a vast, incredibly complicated, and bewildering "system" which lies far beyond the purview of comprehension. Fear and ignorance of mathematics, science, and technology is one of the most serious problems of contemporary life, especially when we consider the countless ways in which these modes of theory and practice inform and influence our economic, social, political, and cultural institutions.

More and better education in mathematics, science, and technology is clearly necessary if we wish to advance the cause of common learning. Contemporary students need to study, not only specific fields of mathematics, natural science, and technology, but also the history, philosophy, and social impact of these modes of theoretical and practical investigation. They need to understand the basic principles of scientific method, the nature of scientific thought, the strengths and weaknesses of scientific and technological theories and procedures. They need to learn how to achieve full "citizenship" in an ever-developing scientific and technological social and political order.

Nationalism and Internationalism in the Modern World. The primary political organization of the modern age is the nation-state, and the ideology of nationalism, even today, remains a powerful force throughout the world. But it is also true that the contemporary age is an international age, a time in which the destinies of all peoples on earth are drawn increasingly into ever-closer conjunction, an era of world-wide economic, political, scientific, technological, and cultural interdependence. The coexistence of the nation-state and the "global village" – the dialectic of localism and universalism, of nationalism and internationalism – is a central fact of modern life. And it is one of those central facts of contemporary world civilization which must be closely examined and understood by all who are seeking a systematic and coherent view of the realities of the current period in human history.

The nature, historical evolution, and current structure of the modern nation-state system and of the contemporary international network of peoples and cultures must be carefully considered in any serious and meaningful education program. The study of nations and "international studies" are essential, given the architecture of contemporary world politics and economics. The disciplines best suited to such inquiry are history and the social sciences (especially political science, economics, geography, anthropology, and sociology), and their relevance in this context constitutes another basis for their inclusion in a contemporary plan for general education. And the fact that the world has become an international network of peoples and cultures is also a good reason for studying languages other than one's own.

The Problem of Meaning in Modern Culture. The process of modernization, as has been argued in preceding sections, has given rise to a world-wide system of nation-states and mass-societies. It has produced a vast and complex world, grounded upon scientific and technological "progress," and subject to rapid, radical, and continuing change. Traditional sources of order and meaning are undermined and weakened by the dynamism of modernization. This is especially so in the case of traditional religion. As the world undergoes the process of becoming modern – via the scientific and technological organization, management, and control of human society –

secular ideas and values tend to overshadow traditional religious perspectives. It is difficult for traditional religions throughout the world (tribal religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) to adapt themselves to the structures and values of modern culture without so compromising their historical principles that they adapt themselves out of existence. It is therefore modern science and technology, and the secular ideologies which have sprung up in modern culture (e.g., secular humanism, Marxism, Positivism, Liberalism, Capitalism, etc.), which are the major directing influences in contemporary society. Traditional religion is no longer the central ideological force in human society, but has taken a back seat to modern secular thought.²⁶

This is, however, a development with very serious consequences for modern man's sense of meaning. For traditional religion (e.g., Judao-Christianity in the West) was the major source of the human sense of the meaning of existence. And with the decline of traditional religion as a major formative influence in human society, a crisis of meaning has developed which has, to a large extent, shaped the psychological climate of contemporary life. Both Nietzsche and Sartre

have stressed the existential importance of this development: the "death of God" is also the "death of meaning;" and an authentic, open-eyed recognition of this fact brings with it the knowledge that man is on his own, abandoned by God, and faced with the task of creating his own meanings – a task fraught with difficulty and conducive to a deep sense of anxiety in the human soul.²⁷ Without the objective values and meanings proclaimed by traditional religion, mankind must either create new values and meanings or learn to live with a sense of normlessness and meaninglessness.

The "decline" of traditional religion, as well as several other aspects of the process of modernization (discussed in preceding sections), has left modern man seriously threatened by the thought that the world is without meaning and that his own life is ultimately absurd; he asks the twofold question, "What is the meaning of existence in general, and what is the meaning of my own existence in particular?," and can arrive at no fully convincing and satisfying answer. He cannot discern the overall purpose of life, and, indeed, he doubts that there is such a general purpose at all! Thus, a central experience of contemporary life is a "crisis of meaning" which is apparently unresolvable.

The problem of meaning in modern culture is a major object of analysis in the fields of theology and religious studies, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature and the arts, and other disciplines having a "psycho-cultural" orientation. Such studies of the problem of meaning should play a significant role in any responsible program of general education.

Conclusion

The implications of the foregoing analysis may be summarized as follows: A humanly meaningful program of general education should be reflective of the general structure of human existence, responsive to the fundamental problems of the human condition, and relevant to the basic patterns and human concerns of the contemporary age. General education should

express both the "universal" and "local" aspects of the human situation. Careful reflection upon human existence, the human condition, and the contemporary age discloses a number of interrelated themes (developed in preceding sections) which might provide a foundation for, and give direction to, a coherent system of general studies. Such themes may be pursued from the standpoints of the various and specific academic disciplines (languages, literature, mathematics, physics, biology, history, philosophy, psychology, etc.), or they may be approached within the framework of interdisciplinary courses and programs. But whatever approach is employed, general education must be centered upon "the human situation," upon those realities, experiences, and concerns that all human beings have in common; for such is the "existential" basis for the common learning which is the primary object of general education.

NOTES

¹The expression, "human person," may be awkward, but it is not redundant. It is logically possible that there are persons who are not human (e.g., gods, angels, extraterrestrials), and that there are humans who are not persons (e.g., fetuses, very seriously retarded or demented humans, humans in irreversible comas, etc.). A "person," as I understand it, is a conscious, self-conscious, rational-intelligent, relatively free, and creative being who is capable of communicating meaningfully with other such beings.

²A harsher judgment of psychological studies was made recently by the eminent psychiatrist, Robert Coles, who teaches at both Harvard and Duke Universities. Students "should be taught philosophy, moral philosophy and theology. They ought to be asked to think about moral issues, especially about what use is going to be made of knowledge, and why – a kind of moral reflection that I think has been supplanted by a more technological education. Replacing moral philosophy with psychology has been a disaster, an absolute disaster!" *Time Magazine* (September 27, 1982), 72.

³There are those who believe that educational institutions should dilute the intellectual-cognitive aims of their programs with a concern for the personal, psychological, social, and moral adaptation, adjustment, or improvement of students. Schools can train minds rather successfully (if they concentrate upon doing so), but the evidence that schooling makes us "better" persons, or that it contributes significantly to the solution of our social and moral problems, is, to say the least, weak. Schools should be "academic" rather than "therapeutic"-educational institutions, not hospitals or rehabilitation centers.

⁴Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Meditationes del Quijote* (1914), trans. E. Rugg and D. Marin as *Meditations on Quixote* (New York, 1961).

⁵Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1943), 54.

⁶See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston, Illinois: North Western University Press, 1970), passim.

⁷George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1932).

⁸See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956); and Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

⁹See George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); and E. L. Boyer, and A. Levine, *A Quest for Common Learning: The Aims of General Education* (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, "A Carnegie Foundation Essay," 1981), 36-37.

¹⁰See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959).

¹¹G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., "Great Books of the Western World," Vol. 46, 1952), 65-69.

¹²Boyer and Levine, 39.

¹³The current Bergen Community College program in "Labor Studies" is the sort of program which is much needed in the study of production and consumption, work and leisure.

¹⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1961), 28-54.

¹⁵See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What Is Man?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*; and Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton Books, 1961).

¹⁶Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1963).

¹⁷See Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. W. Lowrie (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1954).

¹⁸Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

¹⁹Pannenberg, *What Is Man?*, 43.

²⁰Sartre, quoted by Jacques Choron in *Death and Western Thought* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 244.

²¹See Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957).

²²See James M. McPherson, "A House Divided," in C.N. Degler, et al., *The Democratic Experience*, Vol. I (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, fifth edition, 1981), 247. See also Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton Books, 1957), passim.

²³The expression, "secular humanism," has been much abused by the "Moral Majority" and other members of the religious right. The expression is used in this essay to describe a philosophical perspective concerning man and his world, a perspective which is influential and thus worthy of serious theoretical attention.

²⁴See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (New York: The Colonial Press, 1899), passim.

²⁵See Adam Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

²⁶See David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1978).

²⁷See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 21-368; and Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, passim.