

SOCIETY: TODAY AND TOMORROW

OR

WHAT CAN WE MAKE OF A WORLD LIKE THIS?

An Invitation to Explore Human Social
Realities in a Post-Newtonian Psychic-
Social World.

by

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SO
MORE
WILL
LIVE...

evil may be not seeing well enough

so perhaps to become less evil we need only to see more
see what we didn't see before and here everybody is in the game
things look different to different people depending on where
they stand
and if we can share views not convert others to our views
we would get a larger vision
no single group can do it alone the job is too big and we can only make it
if we work it out together
and this is true on a worldwide scale
that if we're not going to find a way
to work it
out together
the whole thing is going to come apart
we need each person each community giving its gift its vision
and this will result in a dialogic system which is the only system
elastic enough for the whole moving picture

--Corita Kent

SOCIETY: TODAY AND TOMORROW

(Notes on an address by Ruben F. W. Nelson, President, Square One Management, Ltd., to the annual meeting of the Ontario Camping Association, March 2, 1972, in Toronto, Canada.)

I will plunge in with a story...

A cruise ship is on the high seas. It has been sailing for weeks. The sun is obscured by clouds so that no shadow falls. The gulls are squawking and the passengers, at the command of the captain, have been assembled on the main deck. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I have called you together to tell you some news--some good and some bad. First the bad news. We are lost. We are utterly and hopelessly lost. The compass is broken, and the maps and charts burned in an accident. The cloud cover is so thick that no shadow falls by day and we can't see the stars by night. The winds and currents of this ocean are so unpredictable that we get no guidance from them as to which direction we're going or what progress we've made. We may even be drifting onto underwater rocks without knowing it, for our sonar is broken as well. Now, for the good news. We're three days ahead of schedule."

Do you feel a little like a passenger on that ship, living in a culture that seems to have little direction or destination, only speed of movement and pride in arriving there first? Speaking of being lost, Daniel Boone, that great American woodsman, was once asked if he had ever been lost. "Nope," replied Boone, "I've never been lost." The questioner couldn't believe his ears. "You mean to tell me that in all the years you've spent in the woods that you never once were lost?" "That's right," says Boone. "Mind you, once in the Rockies I was bewildered for a week and didn't know where I was."

That's the way I experience this culture. In my moments of depression I think we are utterly and hopelessly lost, but most of the time I'm rather more optimistic than that. I'm merely bewildered and don't know where I am.

That I find ours a bewildering world will not be news to any who know me. However, some may be a little disquieted by my admission, particularly since I have been asked to speak on our society and our future. After all, those we identify as competent to speak to us are supposed to know about that which they speak, and if I am bewildered, how can I know; for knowledge, we are all agreed, is marked by certainty, and I have just admitted that I am far from certain.

The world I experience is a bewildering world, and I cannot escape that fact. Consider the evidence. Test it. Savour it. Probe it. Explore it, and finally face it.

Look around and what can be seen?

--We see a former Prime Minister sympathizing with his seventeen-year-old grandson's feeling that maybe the best thing to do is just lie in the streets. We also see him confessing that although he couldn't lead a crusade, he'd like to be in one, "even in the front ranks."

--We see 6% of the world's population consuming 35-45% of the world's resources, and we see that percentage increasing.

--We see the number of science journals exploding at such a rate that their combined weight will equal that of the whole earth by 2001.

--We see the children of God in the name of God urging three precepts on their followers: (a) reject your parents, (b) reject your work, (c) reject your education.

--We see science being used as if it were magic and practioners of magic trying to be scientific.

--We see ourselves using science to create systems to control our environment, which finally end in controlling us. "We develop marvelous individual transport systems which poison the air we breathe; learn how to make paper very cheaply at the cost of ruining our rivers; and fabricate weapons that determine our defence strategy and foreign policy, rather than being determined by them. Above all, the applications of science have produced an unrestricted increase in the human population which we recognize as fatal to our welfare but only have the vaguest idea how to control."¹

--We see such differences in the social perceptions of grown men that only in trivial senses can they be said to live in the same world. At the recent National Conference on the Law, Jack Seeley, in response to a learned paper by Professor Julius Stone, said that, were it not for the fact that he was in polite society and so firmly socialized, he would scream. "The scream arises here as recognition dawns that speaker and hearer do not sufficiently share a common world that at reasonable human cost they can communicate with each other, and hence come hopefully to some common conviction or understand an intelligible difference..." Dr. Seeley went on, "When I speak of not sharing a common world, it is a crushing burden... It is to suggest that one or the other or both occupy a world that is 'hallucinatory.' If Dr. Stone's hope and confidence are well founded, then my friends, in their despair, are in a madness or near madness."²

1. Robert Morrison, "Science and Social Attitudes, Science

2. Jack Seeley - at the First National Conference on the Law, Ottawa, February 2, 1972.

--We see sunsets and flowers and examples of self-sacrificial love; and small babies who smile not only from fear; and Indians who also smile while patiently being surveyed again; and families together on picnics beside not yet polluted lakes.

We look around and we see confusion and turmoil; friends huddling together, calls to action, statements of despair, dropping out, conflict, pollution, disorder and miseducation. We plan and attend conferences on the crisis in our society, the crisis in our schools, the crisis in our environment, the crisis in our government. We work, we plan, we think. We witness resistance to change, both in ourselves and in others. We see others being threatened, and are threatened ourselves. We become defensive and cause defensiveness in others. We see institutions which, like the dinosaur, seem to be bent on extinction because they have no ability to perceive a changing environment and adapt to it. In our moments of despair we suspect that we and our fellows are blind and empty and bankrupt. We yearn for a new style of life and some form of salvation.

So our cry goes out, "Tell me where it's at." And upon hearing that cry, we respond as do Moslems to the call of the minaret. We echo with our very being, "Yes, tell me where it's at." But then we are puzzled and beset by problems, for who knows how it really is with us. To whom do we turn for the statement of our situation which carries clarity of perception and integrity in all its aspects. Should we heed our politicians, and if so, which brand? Our churches? Our universities? Our parents? Our children? Ourselves? Each and all of these sources of "truth" have betrayed us in the past, and so we know that we can trust none of them completely. We know as well that we are not the first people to live in the midst of conflicting claims of many people who call themselves prophets. But this is cold comfort, for we also know that it is only in the long perspective of history that we are able to distinguish with any clarity the true from the false prophets. So where are we at?

I am suggesting that a striking feature of our lives is that we are both confused and in a confusing situation. Consider: there is no overall agreement regarding the state we are in--whether it is healthy or unhealthy; hopeful or hopeless; moving to a glorious or a dismal future, or perhaps no future at all. We seem to be half way up the Tower of Babel, each speaking his own language, or perhaps all using the same words, but with private meanings. Pierre Trudeau, the Calgary Herald, and the F.L.Q. all speak about "social justice," but no one would suggest that any two of them means the same things by these words.

The confusion goes even deeper. We are urged on the one hand to stretch our understanding on a large canvass--to be synthetic in our judgments, linking aspects of our experience

not previously linked and in this sense to get to the roots of our troubles; and on the other, to be carefully empirical in our work, dealing only with hard evidence and that in an analytic manner. Further, we are exhorted to be idealistic, tough-minded, hard-nosed, visionary, pragmatic, imaginative, realistic, systematic, consistent, and not bound by precedent, all at the same time. A hundred different avenues are advocated as a route out of our difficulty. Some cry for new values, others for a return to the old. Many advocate better administration, others see administration as the cause of our troubles, not its solution. We are urged to be both humble and proud. We are urged to acknowledge limits, and to stop trying to be as God; and we are urged to strive after knowledge so that we can finally control everything. Science, technology and analytic rationality are held up before us as blessing--our one best hope for a humane future; and as curse--the source of our present mega-problems. We are told both that we are in the midst of the greatest civilization in the history of mankind, and that our condition is so precarious that we face cultural disintegration and/or physical collapse. The disintegration is said to have its roots in our inability to capture the imagination of the young; the collapse in the "pathological premises" of our culture.

Our confusion is compounded by the fact that we are learning that the very fields we so recently have come to trust as probable sources of truth--economics, sociology, philosophy, psychology, biology--are themselves increasingly under attack from within their own ranks. This raises serious questions about the common strategy of hoping that we can solve our problems by commissioning new research, by creating new departments, institutions, and think-tanks, and by asking the social scientists to do yet more surveys. Now, it appears that the understanding of the scientist is subject to the same limitations as our own, namely, it is both historically conditioned and generally self-reinforcing, with no assured procedures for escaping from vicious circles.

In summary, then, our situation is a dream world for hucksters, charlatans, and simpletons, but a nightmare for men of integrity and humility.

In the face of all this, the question which cries for an answer is, "What does it all add up to?" That's just the problem. It doesn't add up, at least not to anything whole. It is as if someone had given us a box with a hundred million puzzle pieces and no picture to go by. We seem to be able to make a series of unfinished pictures, but unable to complete any one of them. That is, we have both too much and too little information. Too much to make just one picture, and too little to make one coherent picture.

William Arrowsmith speaks to our plight when he talks of "a distinctive modern chaos--a chaos in which the environment as a whole is nobody's business and bears nobody's design, a conglomerate world whose disorder is exposed by the design-

perfection of the parts and their utter unrelatedness. If the parts mostly show superb technical skill, these skills flourish in a general vacuum of design. Thus we have extremely sophisticated medical research carried on with almost absolute disregard for the social causes of disease; hydroelectric systems that create a wasteland in the name of life; reclamation programs which, for want of a civil context, desolate; universities which are powerhouses of specialist skill, but which have no talent for pooling or fielding their skills, and no conscience about their failure to do so. The parts are antagonistic because no priorities are assigned; every authority is at war; all the jurisdictions overlap. The fault is not over-design, but design unanimated by any larger sense of form. The technical mind flourishes because the problems it prefers are soluable, but these are seldom, if ever, the problems from which we all suffer."³

It is in the face of such evidence and experience that I confess that I am bewildered. I am not able to make a coherent whole of my experience. I find rather that I am torn in different directions wanting to respond in at least two inconsistent ways at the same time. The question arises, can we begin to understand the many and inconsistent things that are going on in and around us?

Richard Goodwin puts this question in an article which appeared in the New Yorker in January, 1969: "It would be hard to overstate the extent to which the malaise of powerlessness has eaten its way into our society, evoking an aimless unease, frustration and fury... We feel helpless. Perhaps one can no longer understand the world--only experience it. If this is true, politics can offer no real answer."⁴

I have said that often I am overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness, and I almost fear that I can no longer understand our world, but only experience the tempest and the turmoil of it. Further, I agree with Richard Goodwin that if it is true that we can only experience life, that we can no longer understand, then not only politics, but all other intentional human activities offer no real answer. My own view is not that understanding is impossible, but that it is immensely more difficult than we have previously thought, and immensely more important.

I want to dwell for a moment on how important it is that we develop an adequate understanding of ourselves and our situation. We in North America do not normally think much about the quality of our understanding. Rather, we're action oriented. As soon as we notice that something is wrong, we ask, "What should we do about it?" We are anxious to be doing

3. William Arrowsmith, "Alternative Futures: A Search for a Usable University." Church Society for College Work, No. 2, May, 1971.

4. Richard N. Goodwin, "Reflections: Sources of the Public Unhappiness," The New Yorker, January, 1969.

and to get on with doing. By and large, we see those who invite us to reflect as merely theoretical and not very practical. But in our desire to be active, we fail to notice that--whether we like it or not--when we act, we act on the basis of some understanding or other of who we are, where we are, and what it is we are dealing with. Now this may not seem like an earth-shattering reminder, but it is these understandings that govern our actions, that determine for us which actions we see to be appropriate and which inappropriate in any particular time and place. For example, we all know that if we run out of gas, it's inappropriate to play with the battery to get the car started, or if a child has a cold, it is inappropriate to put a cast on its leg. Such acts reflect a misunderstanding of the nature of cars or children. In cases such as these, the relationship of inappropriate action to our understanding is obvious. It is not quite so obvious when we come to consider how to deal with suburban sprawl, rising land prices, or a mildly corrupt government. But the principle is the same--some understanding of ourselves and our situation is implicit in all human action, in our identification of problems and our decisions of how to deal with them.

I am suggesting, then, that the ability to govern well and to act responsibly is directly dependent upon the quality and adequacy of our understanding of our condition and situation. This being the case, it is critically important--if we wish to act responsibly--that we deepen our understanding of what is going on in and about us. If we misunderstand ourselves or the others with whom we share this green earth, we will likely misbehave in relationship both to them and to ourselves. If we misidentify our situation, we will almost certainly misbehave within it. That is, misbehavior is most often the result of misidentification. At some common levels we know this, for we are all familiar with the rebuke, "Don't do that. Don't you know where you are?" Or, "Don't do that. Who do you think you are, anyway?"

In this light, can we begin to understand the cries of those who seek to be liberated, be they women or students or corporation executives, or a land which has been strip-mined, as crying out saying, "Don't do that to me. Don't you see what I am? In doing what you do, you don't heal, you damage. I'm not that kind of thing at all." The cry for respect and integrity is a cry for understanding.

We need to explore further, for the way we understand our past mistakes largely determines the way in which we attempt to correct our behavior. Therefore, if we are to act well, it is important that we adequately understand how things have gone wrong in the past, and not merely that they have gone wrong. Again, we will not be able to overcome the difficulties we face if we misidentify them.

Our understanding, then, circumscribes the range of possible situations we see ourselves to be in, the range of possible ways

we think things can go wrong, and the range of possible solutions to the things that are wrong. If, regarding any of these, our understanding is inadequate, we are not likely to respond adequately. For example, today it is unlikely that shareholders of a company would accept as an explanation of corporate failure the statement from the company president that the company had been hexed! However, in other times and places, this explanation would have been generally satisfying. One of the games I occasionally play is trying to identify the explanations which today we accept as reasonable, but which will appear to be unreasonable tomorrow to our grandchildren and hopefully to ourselves.

Our need, then, is to develop a sufficiently persuasive understanding of ourselves and our situation such that it can become common among us and guide what we intend to be remedial action, that is, action which actually improves rather than further damages our condition. What follows from this point, therefore, can be understood as an attempt to understand something of ourselves and our situation. In order to give you a sneak preview of what is to come, and also some points of reference so that you know you are on the road, let me note the main features of the landscape to which I will be directing our attention. First, at the most fundamental level, our understanding is, wittingly and unwittingly, consciously and unconsciously, joyfully and painfully, shifting ever so slowly from a Newtonian image of reality to a post-Newtonian image. Second, the realization is growing among us that the realities and patterns of our present--largely Newtonian--world have no longer range future. In short, they lead to destruction of the human race, rather than to its survival. Things cannot go on much longer as they are. Third, the realization is growing among us that the present patterns and realities of our world, regardless of their viability, are inherently destructive of humane life. Things ought not to go on the way they are. Fourth, I will argue that only on the basis of post-Newtonian understanding of reality will we be able to comprehend our situation with sufficient power to respond adequately to ensure not merely the survival of the human animal, but survival in a humane style.

The following excursion into our understanding of human understanding and human knowledge (epistemology) is therefore not merely an end in itself, but rather done in the conviction that without it, even if we realize that, as presently arranged, our society cannot go on and ought not to go on, we are unlikely to survive what we do to each other, even if it is done in the name of good intentions, compassion, and responsible action.

First: the shift from Newtonian to post-Newtonian images of reality and psychic space.

Let me return to the analogy of the jig-saw puzzle. I want you to think with me about three different kinds of jig-saw puzzles and the different kinds of difficulty in making them. Two of the types of puzzles I daresay you have not encountered, but you can imagine them with me.

First, let us imagine an ordinary jig-saw puzzle in which all the pieces have pre-determined and stable shapes and colors. Our task is to make the puzzle. But we do not have the benefit of a cover picture to go by. We are confronted with millions, maybe billions, of pieces, and therefore the task is laborious and some might say practically impossible. That is, we are defeated not by the logic of the task, but by our own inability to cope with all the little bits of information all at the same time. There is just too much for us. However, in principle the puzzle can be made.

The second jig-saw puzzle is a variation of the first. It is also made of millions of pieces which have a pre-determined and stable shape. However, the colors take on a different hue, depending on the order in which they are placed in the puzzle and depending upon the angle from which they are viewed. You can imagine the immense difficulty in making such a puzzle. Now we are not only faced with the complexity of getting the pieces together in the right order--which we have acknowledged is practically impossible due to their number--we are also faced with the fact that those of us who are working on it seem to be making different pictures.

Now the third type of puzzle. Again we are confronted with millions of pieces and with no picture to go by. In this case, as with the second, the colors of the pieces take on different hues depending on the order in which they are assembled and depending on the angle from which they are viewed. However, unlike the first and second puzzles, with this puzzle the pieces themselves are capable, within limits, of taking different shapes. What is more, some of the pieces have more fixed shapes and colors than others, but you never really know what the limits are until you begin to assemble them. The limits for adaptation of each piece have to be tested. We have a puzzle, then, out of which we may make a number of different pictures. Further, there are no tests by which we can tell whether any picture is "right." With the third puzzle, we are faced not only with complexity, but with ambiguity.

The ambiguity is not merely of the surface variety as it was in the second puzzle, but is inherent in the very nature of the puzzle itself. More pictures can be constructed from the puzzle than is possible to construct and consider in any one lifetime, so that in choosing to construct the puzzle in one way and not others, a person is necessarily determining the puzzle possibilities for himself.

Now let's add to our analogy. Suppose that there are three huge rooms, each of which contains the pieces of a particular type of puzzle, and into each of these rooms we put a hundred or maybe a thousand, or maybe 3.5 billion people and say, "Construct the puzzle. You have 50 - 150 years. If you haven't constructed an adequate picture by that time, then you will all be killed."

Consider the problem of being one of those persons, for your very survival and the survival of your children as well depends upon your ability and the ability of those in the room with you to understand the nature of the task you are faced with and to organize yourselves in such a way that it is appropriate to deal with the reality which faces you. Let me repeat, the basic task you face is to organize yourselves appropriately in light of the reality with which you must deal in order that you may survive.

You may see where I'm headed. I want to suggest to you that in fact our situation on this green, spinning, life-filled planet is analogous to the task given those in the puzzle rooms. That is, we have to understand the nature of the reality of which we are a part and organize ourselves in such a way that we are compatible with that reality and so ensure our survival. As with the puzzle, if we misunderstand the nature of the reality and misorganize ourselves, then our chances for survival are not only slim, they are non-existent.

Let us return to the people in the three puzzle rooms and consider the task they face. In the first room, the task is difficult because of its inherent complexity--the many bits and pieces that need to be fitted together. It is not, however, inherently confusing, contradictory or ambiguous. Rather, it is only inherently complex. The survival of those in puzzle room one depends on the creation of adequate memory devices, either in themselves or machines (computers), which will enable them at least in principle to solve the problem of putting all the pieces together in their right order.

Consider the essential dynamics of living in a world which is like puzzle number one:

(1) In such a world, reality and, therefore, truth are static and a-temporal. That is, even if there is some difficulty in discovering the way the world really is, there is one--and only one--fixed, final state which, if known, would be an adequate description of how reality is and will be forever.

(2) It follows from this that, in such a world, teaching would be the basic mode of coming to know. That is, those who know how the world is must pass on to others how it will be for those others.

(3) Further, this would allow a permanent hierarchy of power and authority to develop, for those who know really do have a claim upon the attention and obedience of those who do not know.

Given these assumptions, it is understandable that the basic human organizations in such a world would be authoritarian and linear. One implication of this is that communication would be designed to flow from those in authority to those who are subservient. Relatively little consideration would be given to the responses of the subservient to those in authority, provided they do what they are told to do. One final feature would be that since reality does not change, once what is real is known, it would be important to convey to others the nature of that reality. The techniques used to do this would be seen in themselves to be unimportant. As a general perception then, technique in both teaching and other areas would be assumed to be neutral and value-free. In McLuhan's terms, not only is it false that the medium is the message, the medium does not have a message.

I will not develop this further, although it is interesting to develop a full description of the human and social dynamics of such a world.

Now consider the people working on puzzle type number two. Superficially, their world appears to be dynamic, moving and ambiguous. In fact it is not. The survival of those in puzzle room two depends on their putting the pieces of the puzzle in the right order. For this task, the coloration of the pieces does not matter. Therefore, if those in the room can concentrate on the shapes, which are stable, and ignore the colors, they will survive. Their task is more difficult than that facing the people working on the first puzzle in that they not only have to remember the shapes of the pieces they are working with, they have to forget or ignore the color and texture of those pieces.

It would not be surprising in such a world if people came to understand their world as essentially dualistic; that is, if they made sharp distinctions between those aspects of their lives which were stable, in principle common to all of them, and those aspects which apparently were unstable, not common to them. They might call the first objective, and the second subjective. It might even be that they would say that the first would be measured by something they would call "science," because the shapes are independent of every culture, and that the second, where it was known at all, would be known by artists or by each man individually. Over time they might say that the colors of the puzzle are desirable, but logically unrelated to the survival of the people.

And so they would create a world divided neatly and understandably into facts on the one hand and values on the other. Things that are the same for all men, which can be common, which can be publicly conversed about on the one hand, and things which differ for men, which are private and personal, on the other. A full set of distinctions would run something like this: on the one hand we have the world of objectivity, empirical reality, scientific measurement--a public world of facts; on the other hand is a world of subjectivity, artistic impression--a personal

world of values. These distinctions would be so common among them that they would hardly give them second thought. In a hundred thousand ways the distinctions would be reinforced daily.

Beyond these distinctions, the world of puzzle room two would be essentially similar to the world of puzzle room one. There is one basic, fixed reality, but with a pluralism of colors.

Now let us visit the third room. We can see immediately that if those in room three attempt to organize themselves according to the principles which are effective in the first and second cases, they will not be successful. Therefore, those in room three must develop ways of governing themselves which are peculiarly related to the nature of the reality they face--namely, a shifting, moving, dynamic reality. Consider their world with me.

(1) For them reality and truth are dynamic and historical. There is not only an awareness that man has difficulty in perceiving the way things are with him, but a further awareness that "the way things are" is not itself a fixed and static feature of "the world."

(2) It follows from this that "the ability to perceive" would be seen as a learned skill, and an essential skill.

(3) In addition, there would be no basis on which a strong and permanent hierarchy of authority could be established, for there would be little room for claims of certainty and authority which were not recognized and understood by other men.

Given this situation, in order to understand, men in such a world must talk to one another. Truth is not only discoverable within history, but is itself dynamic and conditioned by history. It would become imperative therefore that, in order to understand how their situation was, men in the room would have to talk to one another. Therefore, it would be essential that feedback be built into their world. A further feature of their world would be that authority would rest within a situation on the common recognition of those within it. There would be no room for excathedra statements. There would no longer be any credibility in such claims. In addition, it would no longer be assumed that as each age rolls by, man's understanding of himself and his condition would necessarily improve. If human understanding is thoroughly temporal, there is no reason why the wisdom of men cannot decrease as well as increase with time. This makes an easy liberalism an untenable position. Finally, and very much related to the above, would be the fact that technique could not be seen to be value-free and neutral. That is, the processes by which men lived would not be seen as unrelated to the realities by which they lived. As McLuhan claims, the medium is the message. What would be startling to those in rooms one and two would be the realization that the medium even has a message.

Now let us complicate the picture just one more time. Let us collapse the three rooms into one and collapse the three puzzles into puzzles of the third type. We will still demand that the people organize themselves in such a way so as to make the puzzle within a set time limit and ensure their survival.

Note that the pieces of the third puzzle are such that to any particular person in any particular time they have a particular color and shape. Therefore, unless a person understands that the particular color and shape he sees are the color and shape he and his people have given to the puzzle piece, he can mistake it for a puzzle piece with a fixed shape and reality. That is, it is possible to mistake a type three piece for a type one or two piece and act accordingly. And so what would we find? We would find argument among those in the room about which pieces should go where, about how it would be best to organize the people to put the pieces together, and also, and most fundamentally, about the nature of the reality that faces the people making the puzzle.

Hopeless, you say to me. Absolutely hopeless that such a people should ever learn to get their heads into a common space, to learn to talk together and to cooperate sufficiently to make the puzzle. It may well be, but if it is hopeless for them, it is hopeless for us, for such is our situation.

I want to suggest to you that the three different types of puzzles are roughly analogous to the three basic views of reality which are found within the history of Western culture, and among us today. Therefore, if we can understand and explore this analogy, it may be of some use to us in our attempt to understand the dynamics of our world. In my view, much of the tension in our day stems from the fact that, almost unwittingly, we differ as to the nature of the reality with which we are dealing, the nature of the appropriate ways to govern ourselves, and the nature of what a "successful" puzzle picture looks like.

Although the puzzle analogy is inadequate and a caricature, you will find that it in fact roughly parallels the development of the understanding of reality and knowledge in Western culture. I would suggest that at this time--1972--our culture is dominated by the official myth that the stuff of life is analogous to puzzle type number two. I would suggest further that very few people have noticed with any consistency that in fact the stuff of life is analogous to puzzle type number three. So we continue to explain ourselves to ourselves on the basis of type two reality assumptions. In short, much of the confusion and tension in our own day results from earnest and well intentioned people trying to account for their experience on the basis of an inherently inadequate understanding. This is the case whether we look at the turmoil in academic disciplines, particularly the social sciences, or at the turmoil in government organization, or in church renewal, or in family life.

Now let me broadly characterize the difference between the three puzzle types. Types one and two are essentially Newtonian

models; that is, the dynamics of Newtonian physics. Each piece is seen as being discreet and separate and stable. The laws of their interrelationships are seen as determined and capable of being known. Type number three reality is post-Newton. In it we have shifted into the world of Einstein and Heisenberg in which it is no longer possible to apply Newtonian categories of stable parts and wholes and their fixed interrelationships. Rather, now all aspects of reality are seen in relationship to all other aspects and always in shifting flight. Puzzle three is in the world of relativity and uncertainty.

I am arguing, then, that one of the most basic shifts occurring in our culture is the shift away from the age-old image of knowledge as timelessly true, certain, and clear, to a post-Einstein and post-Heisenberg image of knowledge which is marked by relativity and uncertainty.

There are two significant aspects of the shift from a Newtonian to post-Newtonian world that I want to consider briefly.

The first point is that it is both possible to make different worlds out of "this" world and that we actually do so. That is, there are different ways of being in this world. These ways are not merely different interpretations of the same basic human experience, but are rather different experiences of which people are conscious.

We must not assume--as Western epistemology traditionally--that men all experience the same reality, but understand, value and color it differently. This is a type two assumption. Fundamentally different understandings do not produce different consciousnesses of the same experience. Rather, fundamentally different understandings produce different experience of which men become conscious. John W. Dixon, Jr., makes this point when he says:

We do not receive perceptions and experiences and order them by consciously chosen patterns. Rather, we receive perceptions and experiences by means of these patterns; hence, to our psyche, they are the given forms of reality itself. Since these are the modes of our apprehension of experience, we cannot receive--sometimes quite literally we cannot 'see' --those things which do not fit our images.⁵

The realities we "see" by means of our understanding of reality, our orientation to reality will be "given" as "natural" as "the way things really are." The realities we do not see, for all practical purposes do not exist for us. An orientation

5. John W. Dixon, Jr., "Hierarchy and Laity," The Christian Century, Volume LXXIV, no. 34 (October 25, 1967), p. 1354.

to reality therefore shapes what we take to be knowledge we live by--whether it is taken for granted or whether we have a rational justification for it--it is a function of our reality orientation. If we radically change our orientation to reality, we will radically alter both what we think we can know and what we think we do know. For example, for an astrologer to become a positivistic administrator is not merely for him to accept a different interpretation of the same reality he knew as an astrologer, it is, rather, for him in large measure to accept a different reality, a different understanding of what the facts are, how they can be known, and how they can be interpreted. It follows from this that insofar as men or cultures have different orientations to reality, they in some important sense do not live in the same world. Our reality orientation, then, determines fundamentally both the world in which we live and our way of life--our way of being--in that world.

Second, we can no longer comfort ourselves with claims to knowledge as if these were certain and timeless and impersonal. Now we must understand and acknowledge not only that all knowledge claims are culturally conditioned, but that all knowledge claims are also statements of personal perception and to that extent are also value statements. In short, the world of fact and value of the second puzzle type has been collapsed together again in the third, as it is in the first. However, in the third world, unlike the first, we must face the fact that, in Peter Berger's phrase, there is no "epistemologically safe platform" upon which we may hoist ourselves to view our world correctly and adequately. Rather, all our understanding and claiming to know takes place within history without proofs, with no assurance, and with no beginning points.⁶ The only evidence of the adequacy of our vision will relate to the quality of the life that is lived and even about that there may be discussion. To put it in other language, there is never any assurance in the immediate present as to which are the true prophets and which are the false.⁷

A number of assertions follow from these two features of a post-Newtonian world:

(1) It follows from this that all knowledge claims of all men must be taken seriously, provided only that those who claim to know appear to be serious-minded and concerned to know their environment. That is, there is no way a priori by which we can tell that another's claims are false. In any given situation, if we do not see what another claims to see, we can never be sure that our failure to see is not due to our inability or unwillingness to attend and recognize the aspect of reality, rather than to the non-existence of that aspect of reality in question.

6. In this light, think of a shift from a linear, hierarchical world, to an ecological world.

7. See the 14th chapter of Jerimiah.

(2) Perception, then, is a learned skill. We cannot and do not just open our eyes and see, rather we have to learn to perceive our world right by means of taking our perceptions and testing them. It is the case, then, that as with other skills, some will learn to perceive very well and others not so well.

(3) So our situation is essentially ambiguous--even the knowledge claims which we take for granted and which we literally "depend on" for our continued existence are in principle open to question and to correction.

(4) We can never rest easily in what we take to be our knowledge or the knowledge of our culture because we realize our situation is inherently ambiguous. Consider: (a) none of our perceptions are self-validating; (b) we can err regarding our perceptions; (c) the patterns of activity, of language, of organization within our culture both reflect and reinforce an implicit ontology--they limit the range of realities in which we are interested and which therefore can enter our practical intentions; (d) there are far more persons and cultures with whom we could test our perceptions than we are able actually to meet, live with or come to know by other means; (e) that we are experts at shaping our perceptions to fit our preconceptions.

(5) Given the above, we must reject any claim of any one person or cultural perspective which claims to be a final and true perspective on the world. Such an absolute position cannot be substantiated. The disagreements between men regarding aspects of reality are not simply the result of one of the parties refusing to look and see what is there. Such a position is not only false, but, as we saw above, dangerous. Such an understanding of man's nature and situation has been the foundation of all absolutists and, hence, totalitarian claims.

(6) An understanding such as the one we are developing allows only for confessional dialogue. There is no justifiable basis on which one may ever attempt to coerce another into perceiving or understanding as he himself does. This is the case not only because such attempts at coercion do not work, but because to do so is to treat the other as less than a free, responsible, and autonomous human being. This is not to say, however, that we should simply leave each other alone and let each do his own thing. Such an understanding assumes the essentially individualistic understanding of our culture which we are arguing is destructive and ill-founded. Rather, we must necessarily engage in conversation regarding how the world is and how it is best to live in it. This dialogue will be never-ending. There must be within it, however, a special place for the dissenters. To excommunicate, to outlaw, another is both to deny his personhood and to assume that one's own understanding is so complete that it cannot be added to.

(7) Further, this understanding provides no basis on which we may justify our coercion of another to act in a particular way without, at the same time, a deep sense of failure and regret. The appeal to coercive force may be necessary in order to stop someone from damaging another, but its use is always a sign of social and personal failure. Therefore, coercive force should be used as little as possible. Further, only those who are strong enough to use it only when necessary, and who do so with reluctance can be trusted with it.

(8) We are responsible for the world we create, for the realities in the face of which we live, for they are socially created by us and our people. Therefore, it is--to use Sartre's term--"bad faith" to appeal to the realities of "the way things are" as if these were given by God or Nature and not socially constructed in order to justify our actions and to seek to avoid blame (after all we say "ought" implies the freedom of "can"). That we do attempt to protect our moral flanks by such appeals to reality as given is clear. This was the basic defence of the prisoners at Nuremberg and remains today the basic defence of administrators, legislators, welfare workers and no doubt gangsters when unjust acts need justifying. Although by such appeals we only seek to deny our responsibility for the way they are, by them we also deny our humanity. For as we have seen above, we are active intentional beings who socially create realities, whether this is acknowledged or not. The choice is not whether we will create our world and ourselves, for this we do willy nilly, but whether or not we do so consciously and responsibly. By acting in "bad faith" we "misrepresent choice as destiny and thus deny the choices actually made."⁸

The above understanding of man, human knowledge and the human situation is such that it allows us to establish some knowledge claims as sufficiently well-grounded to act on them and even to stake our lives on them. However, our situation will always be ambiguous and there is no way this can ever be removed--to attempt to do so is to mistake our situation, the nature of human knowledge and hence to distort man. Our situation, then, is and will forever be that--as Paul Ziff notes--"If my theory (understanding) neatly fits what seems to me to be the facts, then I am inclined to accept what seems to be the facts as in fact the facts about the matter. I do not see any other way to proceed."⁹

The life style that results from such an understanding will be marked by an open-ended commitment to acknowledge and to know not only what there is but all there is, and by a struggle to constantly revise and make more adequate one's conceptualizations and therefore one's self and one's actions.

9. Paul Ziff, "Semantic Analysis," p. 41.

All of this will require some strength of will to enable one to persist in the face of constant ambiguity and change. It will also depend, as we have seen, on one participating as a member of a community of trust. It is in this way that we can see that being a member of a community is a necessary condition of our coming to perceive, our coming to know, and our becoming persons.

Our understanding directs us to the insight that we necessarily and essentially live in a shared world, that we belong together as men, that the health of ourselves as persons and the health of the communities in which we participate are forever intertwined, such that one is not possible without the other. Men are social creatures through and through in the sense, then, that (a) in order to become conscious at all there must be other objects in the world; (b) in order to become persons we must share a world with other persons, and (c) in order to establish knowledge we must participate in confessional dialogue within communities of trust.

Between 10:00 and 11:00 on a Thursday morning in early March, it may not appear to be overly exciting to have someone tell you that for him it is real and important to acknowledge that men live by different realities and that it is inadequate to explain the differences between men merely by saying they interpret the same realities differently. I have taken the time to explore this claim, even if only for a little while, because my claim is that this little noticed and little understood shift from Newtonian to post-Newtonian psychic space is more fundamental for human understanding and human history than the shift Copernicus made. Heaven knows, we were long enough working out the implications of that one.

Before going on, let me briefly review what has been said to this point. First, I have confessed that I experience this world as bewildering and difficult to grasp and understand. Second, I have argued that this is no mere passing phenomenon, but is in the essential nature of this world, for we are now coming to understand that reality is almost wholly participatory. We participate in giving it shape for us, and the quality of its shape for us depends upon our ability to give it shape. Third, of the very nature of things, we need each other in a confessional dialogue to clarify our own understanding and to develop together a common reality. Fourth, we can no longer excuse ourselves from taking action on the grounds that we were forced into such and such an act by the "reality" of the situation. That is, on this understanding human life is again essentially moral, rather than peripherally moral and essentially value free and technical.

But, you may be protesting, so what? So we now have a more adequate understanding of the differences among us. What difference does it make?

My answer, of course, is that it makes a great deal of difference, for we will discover that not only is it the case that there are different ways men can be in the world, but that not all of these ways are compatible with the continued survival of the human animal, let alone of his continued survival in a humane manner. We are now being faced with the question of which way we will be in the world. What will our style be? What will the realities be in the light of which we function? These are the questions that are being pressed upon us in two different but highly related forms.

Second: the realization that we cannot go on the way we are much longer.

There was a time, not very many months and years ago that I would get upset that so few others seemed to care about or even to see the fact that the present form of life that dominates Western society in general and North America in particular is incompatible with the long-term continuation of human life. But I no longer worry about whether the great mass of North Americans are alert to the fact that our society is in crisis. If they are not now, they soon will be. Their awareness will be taken care of quite nicely, thank you, over the next two to four years, beginning now.

There are two basic thrusts to the kind of information that is being made readily available to all literate North Americans. First, there is the growing perception that the patterns which dominate the organization of American culture are inherently destructive of man and man's environment. In short, things cannot go on the way they are much longer. Second, is the perception that the present patterns of North American life are inherently destructive of man himself. In short, things ought not to go on much longer.

Not all persons who see the information which leads to the first conclusion also see that which leads to the second, and vice versa. There are some who are worried about the inhumanity of our present systems and worry that it might go on forever. But they need not, for there is little chance of that. There are others who see the way our present attack on our green earth limits our future but have not yet recognized that, should we solve the problem of living with nature, we still face the problem of living with ourselves, and further that in fact they are both of a piece. As John Steinhart said in a report for the Ford Foundation: "It is impossible to believe that the mere absence of pollution will provide an end to our present malaise."¹⁰

10. John Steinhart, Search for a Future, a report for the Ford Foundation, 1970.

We will not, of course, make simple decisions in a vacuum, but rather act on the basis of our accumulated understanding as to who we are and where we are. Nevertheless, there is a ripeness in our time, for we are faced with fundamental choices. Consider just some of the evidence. I suspect the most talked of document for 1972 will be the new report of the Club of Rome which is to be released March 6. It is entitled "The Limits of Growth." In the last month I have seen three articles in the press--one on the front of the Montreal Star. To my knowledge this is the first time this kind of information has made front-page news, but it will not be the last. The essential thrust of the Club of Rome report is summed up thus: "All growth projections end in collapse." This was reported for the first time in the January 24 issue of Time magazine of this year. That same issue of Time also reported on a "Blueprint for Survival" devised by 33 of the United Kingdom's most distinguished scientists who warn that unrestricted industrial and population expansion must lead "to the breakdown of society and the life support systems of this planet, possibly by the end of this century, and certainly within the lifetime of our children." Or you can consider the work of Paul Ehrlich and Barry Commoner in the field of ecology, where the evidence is overwhelming that we are threatening the natural life support systems of this planet by our "exploitation" of natural resources and human beings. (The only word we seem to use in relation to resources is "exploitation." How long has it been since the basic word in relationship to nature was "stewardship" or "husbanding"?)

Henri Esser points out in his article "Social Pollution"-- "Environmental pollution will not kill us; if our social disfunctions do turn out to lead to catastrophic poisoning of the world, we will kill each other first." Stop to think about that one. There is no question that he is right. The threat to man is not merely our misuse of the environment, but our misuse of each other in our panic caused by our misuse of the environment.

Let us put it another way. At the present time, 6% of the world's population in North America consumes over 40% of the world's resources, and by the end of this decade, at present growth rates, that same population will require 100% of the world's resources. Much as the President of the United States and the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Part may now be fast friends, it is unlikely that the latter will let the former get away with such a feat.

Almost everywhere you turn there is evidence that we are well into significant social crises. But still we are gentlemen and are told not to panic--which is good advice--but we are also told that nothing is seriously wrong--which is bad advice. Consider this final paragraph in a page-seven article from the February 23 Globe and Mail article entitled "Are the Ecologists False Prophets?":

The authors of Britain's own Blueprint for Survival ask for the decentralization of society, the restriction of physical and social mobility and a return to the land. It is curious that after a decade in which scientists have urged more power for the social sciences, they should now have embarked on social innovations without the benefit of sociological advice.

To say all this does not of course imply that there are no environmental problems. In comparatively prosperous communities, it is right that taxpayers should elect to purchase cleaner air and cleaner water, for example, but it is surely mistaken to expect that developing societies will give these goals equal priority. To be sure, for the attainment of these and similar objectives, advanced societies will have to develop legal and administrative machinery for balancing more accurately the interests of individuals and of the community at large.

Yet is there reason to fear that this will be impossible? Experience in the United States in recent years has been encouraging. The efficient regulation of modern pollution requires but an extension of the processes by which public nuisances were abated not merely in the nineteenth century but in Roman times. One of the most pernicious dangers of the extreme environmental movement is that it will create such a sense of imminent catastrophe that the will to use the humane institutions of civilized communities will be undermined.

Contrast the safe quiet tone of that to the reply of Paul Ehrlich to the Playboy interviewer who suggested to him that he (Ehrlich) really was an alarmist and that that wasn't nice. Ehrlich's reply: "I am an alarmist, but I am very goddamned alarmed. I believe we are facing the brink..."¹¹

Consider also the evidence presented in the second volume of the report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy, "A Science Policy for Canada,"¹² and the work of Willis Harman¹³ at Stanford Research Institute.

Given all this, I no longer feel uptight about the fact that relatively few take seriously the cultural crisis we face. The need to play Jeremiah before the exile is lessening every day. The scales will be torn from our eyes whether we like it or not. We will find ourselves to be naked, even if we are not ashamed.

11. Interview with Paul Ehrlich, Playboy, August, 1970, p. 58.

12. A Science Policy for Canada, Vol. 2, available from Information Canada, Ottawa.

13. Willis Harman is Director of the Educational Policy Research Center, Stanford Research Institute, Stanford, California.

Third: the realization that we ought not to go on the way we are.

The essential inhumanity of our present social arrangements--in spite of our best intentions--is slowly being forced upon our consciousness. This is not to suggest that we are not nice people or that we are ill-intentioned, but rather that unwittingly we have patterned ourselves, our environment, and our social relations in ways which are profoundly and inherently anti-human. In the language of our puzzles, our present world essentially reflects a puzzle two understanding. Unfortunately for us, we are coming to realize that human beings must necessarily live in a puzzle three world if they are to develop and retain their humanity. One of the differences between the second and third types of world is that in the second, we comfort ourselves with the thought that intelligence and compassion can be separated one from the other, so that if we are one, we do not necessarily have to be the other. In the third world, as Robert Theobald reminds us, we are coming to understand that to be intelligent and to be compassionate are the same thing. This, of course, is as much a judgment on supposed intelligence without compassion as it is on supposed compassion without intelligence. In short, it is no longer good enough to just--like Avis--try harder, we must also understand who and where we are and respond according to the realities with which we are dealing.

It is likely that the struggle to understand the essential inhumanity of our present organizational patterns will be much longer and much harder than the struggle to understand the threat to us posed by our rape of our environment. For coming to understand who we are and the damage we inflict on one another is much more threatening to our self-image than is coming to understand what we are doing to our environment. It may well be that in large measure our resistance to understanding the damage we do to each other in the name of good intention is rooted in our resistance to seeing ourselves as essentially stumbling and awkward and blind. We seem to find it easier to picture both ourselves and those against whom we struggle as heroically evil and consciously vicious, rather than as merely inept and essentially fearful to learn the worst of ourselves. However, I find myself unable to escape the conclusion that by and large we do not know who or where we really are and how to behave accordingly.

If our understanding is as important to our survival as I argued earlier, then it is not sufficient that we merely understand that we face a cultural and ecological crisis. Rather, we must as well fundamentally alter our understanding of who we are and where we are. Our future is neither pre-determined by fate nor will it grow magically, but depends upon our responses, our ability to listen, our acts of courage, and our failures of nerve. One thing is clear, however--there will be no resurrection without death. As with Israel, for whom there was no rebuilding the temple without exile, for us there will be no rebuilding of our culture without

having to face who and where we are. Our survival, then, depends in large part on our ability to understand that most of the things we know how to do are destructive; that as often as not we don't really know what we're doing.

Fourth: the realization that a post-Newtonian world can only be governed on the basis of honesty, humility, responsibility, and love.

Finally, our survival depends upon our willingness to together invent ways of governing ourselves and our world on the basis of compassion, understanding, mutuality and support. In our personal lives, we have known these things for a long, long time, but we have never allowed ourselves to trust these insights from our personal relations as being centrally important to our public and institutional selves. Let me put it to you this way: we are coming to realize that the understanding which is implicit in our public lives (essentially type two assumptions) is not a fit basis on which to govern the world.

Now we can see that the struggle to learn to support one another is not cheap idealism, but the most hard-headed, realistic response in terms of human survival. The bind is, however, that we cannot force mutuality upon one another. So either we learn to respect one another and to live together as human animals, or we die together. Even the willing use of coercion by the few on behalf of the many will not work. The end result of such action is a nightmare, whether it is called 1984, Clockwork Orange, or lobotomies for everyone. In short, as Patrick Watson said in a recent Macleans article, liberalism really is dead, for it is not founded upon a deep enough analysis of who we are and where we are. The sooner this is acknowledged and put on the top of the table, the better.

We are now challenged to learn to care sufficiently for ourselves and our fellow men that we are willing to go through the painful experience of confessing together that we really don't know what we're doing, and to learn to act together accordingly. I'm rather more sad than angry, for one ability we seem to have lost in our public lives is the ability to corporately confess our inadequacy. It is not part of the tradition of our public service or our universities or political parties, and only in the hollownest ways a tradition of our churches.

Nevertheless, in the shift to a post-Newtonian world, we are being faced with the realization that those very skills, abilities, and organizational principles which in a Newtonian world led to our survival, now damage and destroy us. All that we had learned as appropriate on the basis of a fixed and given reality is not merely inadequate, but dangerous to our survival as men together. Our health lies, then, as does our future, in our willingness and our ability to together explore post-Newtonian, psychic space.

Postscript

If my insight can be trusted, then we can expect that one of the most important dynamics of our day is our struggle, in ways we do not always understand, to discover post-Newtonian psychic-social space and work out the implications of that discovery. Further, if I am right, both the discovery and the working out will take place over generations and not merely years or decades. That is, in the midst of the confusion in which we live, a new world is being born, a new life style is struggling to emerge, new perceptions, assumptions, attitudes, and standpoints are coalescing to form an increasingly coherent understanding of our situation.

I am under no illusions regarding the ease with which we can form and articulate a new way of being in the world. Those of us who live now live during the death of one great culture and the creation and clarification of another. There is not, nor can there be, a guarantee that our transformation will be successful. We are faced not only with social turmoil but with a host of apparently minor decisions regarding who and where we are. Yet it is by means of these very decisions that we create ourselves and our world. Surely this is one of the things that make our present situation so very difficult. We are much clearer about those things which we do not want than about those things which will be adequate to our future. For example, we can often effectively criticize and destroy things in the present, and at the same time are only able to put forward alternative understandings in the most tentative and hesitant manner.

It is often said that we should not criticize until we have a fully developed alternative. This seems to me to totally misunderstand the dynamics of the creation of alternative understandings. Rather, we must defend the appropriateness of tentative experimentation, particularly in a situation such as our own in which new models of global understanding are being created. We must, of course, be willing to see our experiments heavily modified in the light of carefully evaluated experience. None of our particulars are holy and timeless. This is not a defect of our present situation, but a necessary aspect of it.

John MacMurray, in the introduction to his 1953 Gifford Lectures, reinforces the precariousness of developing new understanding in these words:

It is one thing to discover the presuppositions underlying a historic tradition, and to recognize that they are no longer tenable. It is quite another, if that tradition is one's own, to track down all the effects of those presuppositions upon the body of belief and opinion which one has inherited. The influence of the old assumptions is pervasive and unformulated. It is not possible even if it were desirable, to empty one's mind completely and start afresh in a condition of intellectual innocence. It is only to be expected, therefore, that I have carried over much from the old order that should have been left behind, and my tentative theorizing will be found liable, at many points,

to the objection that it still presupposes what
it purports to reject.¹⁴

So it is with us.

¹⁴. John MacMurray, The Self as Agent (London, Faber and Faber) 1956, p. 14.

WHAT CAN I READ?

The material listed below may be helpful in your exploration of the themes of this paper. These documents contain enough further references to keep you going for the rest of your life.

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The Church Review, a newsletter of the Church Society for College Work, 99 Brattle Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138.

The Old Testament.